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OR,

The Coolest Woman in New York.

A Romance of the Traps, Trails and
Mysteries of a Great City.

BY CAPT. HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "FLASH DAN," "DENVER DUKE,"
"COOL COLORADO," "KEEN KENNARD,"
"MAJOR BLISTER," "CAPTAIN COLD-
GRIP," "LUCIFER LYNX," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

TWENTY THOUSAND FRANCS REWARD.

UPON the spire tips of the sister cities—New York and Brooklyn—fell the last rays of a summer sun.

They touched also the giant pillars of the great bridge, swarming then, as always, with hurrying people, and tipped the waves of the widening bay with crests of gold.

At this hour the day departing was more beautiful than the morning at its birth.

Scores of people, for the most part strangers to these wonderful sunsets, stopped in the middle of the bridge to enjoy and admire the scene.

THE BOY WALKED UP TO AND AROUND THE DISGUISED COLDGRIP AND LOOKED AT HIM ADMIRINGLY FOR SEVERAL SECONDS. "OH, BUT YOU'RE A DAISY CAP'N!" WAS THE CURT COMMENT.

Among the pedestrians was a man who came from toward Brooklyn.

There was nothing about the person to attract special attention, but those who looked for the second time at him saw that he had a deep-set, brilliant black eye, and that his movements were quick and nervous.

In figure he was short and somewhat stout, rather dark in complexion, and had a full crop of hair as black as his eyes.

A mustache shaded his mouth.

His garments were good, though somewhat worn, and his only ornament was a plain gold ring that encircled one of the fingers of his left hand.

He did not lessen his gait until he had reached the boundary line between the two cities.

Then he stopped and threw a rapid glance around.

"This is the line!" he exclaimed. "Yonder is Brooklyn and a life of quiet; over there, New York, and perhaps a fierce fight for—Heaven knows what! A person would think I've had enough of life's battle, but while *she* rolls in wealth I am not going to starve."

The last sentence came in tones that attracted the attention of a couple at his elbow.

A young girl and an elderly gentleman, probably father and daughter, exchanged looks.

"Can you tell me what yon tall building is?" asked the old man, pointing toward New York as he looked at the person who had just given his thoughts utterance.

"No, sir."

"Then you, too, are a stranger here?"

"I don't know the city," was the answer and the short man drew off, adding to himself with a smile:

"I know some cities across the water better," then he resumed his walk toward New York and disappeared.

"Why do you look so after that man, papa?" asked the girl. "You have never seen him before."

"I don't know, Laurel; I am trying to think," was the reply. "I seldom forget faces, and somehow-or-other that fellow's has strangely impressed me. Let me see if I can't pick him out."

The daughter turned again to the sights that charmed her eyes while the old man passed his hand over his forehead as if to collect his thoughts.

"I think I have him!" was the sudden exclamation heard at the girl's side.

"Well?"

"I never saw him but once before, and then in Paris."

"During your visit to the Continent?"

"Yes, Laurel. You will recollect that I passed a week in Paris as the guest of my friend Mr. Goballe, a judge of the criminal courts?"

"Yes."

"Well, I saw that man when he came up for sentence. I became interested in him when the judge told me he was English. He was sent to New Caledonia for life for a crime which appropriately finished a long career of crookedness."

"For life? and he is here!" exclaimed the daughter. "Do they pardon their criminals in France?"

"Not very often. I am at a loss to know how that man got to this country. His case was a desperate one, and the first three years of his banishment were to be passed on one of the prison hulks stationed in New Caledonia. If my friend, the French judge, were living, I would write him concerning my discovery."

"What was the prisoner's name?" asked the girl with increasing curiosity.

"I have forgotten it entirely, but I think my diary of the continental trip will supply it. I have not thought of the fellow since I saw him led from the court with the last words of the life sentence in his ears. Is it not very strange, Laurel?"

"It is romantic!" cried the girl. "You know I have always maintained that people you have once met you will surely meet again. Does not this incident prove it?"

The old man laughed, but in a moment was serious again.

"The police ought to know about him!" he said. "I don't like to persecute a man who has never done me a wrong, but society ought to be warned in this instance. What do you think about it, my child?"

"I would let him go," was the answer. "He may be leading a different life—"

"Not that man," interrupted the old gentleman, with a shake of the head. "Men like him never reform."

"Then you can't afford to incur his hatred."

"He did not recognize me."

"You do not know. I thought he started when you addressed him."

"As any criminal would have done. I shall post the police."

The last sentence was quickly, but firmly spoken, and the young girl did not put forward another remonstrance.

"I shall do it at once," continued the old gentleman. "Let us go on, Laurel. We have seen enough of the cities from the bridge. To-morrow we will take in the Park." And a few

minutes later the couple descended the stair at the New York entrance, and were lost in the throngs on the sidewalks.

As for the short man with the black eyes, he was already far away, and a train was whisking him up town toward the houses of the wealthy.

If he had thought twice of the man who had pretended to recognize him on the bridge, the affair no longer bothered him.

The sun had set, and night was spreading her sable wings over the great metropolis.

The little man got out at one of the Elevated stations well up-town, and walked rapidly along an avenue famous for its palatial homes and the wealth of their occupants. He seemed to know exactly where he wanted to go, for after he had walked some distance, he mounted a flight of broad sandstone steps, and jerked a brass knob, which rung a bell in a hall beyond.

"Here I am. Now for the opening skirmish!" he exclaimed to himself.

In a little while the door was opened by a light colored darky, who looked half insolently at the visitor.

"Is Mrs. Van Gordon in?" asked the man on the step.

"No, sir," said the servant in a voice that drew a smile to the visitor's lips.

"Don't give me the old game," he laughed. "Please show me to the reception-room and announce me to Mrs. Van Gordon. My card, eh? Certainly." And he drew a bit of shiny cardboard from his pocket and extended it. "Ah! wait a moment! there!" he tore off the lower left hand corner of the card. "Now, you can deliver the message. I prefer to see the lady inside. Which room, please?"

The servant opened his eyes at the man's cool impudence, for he was already in the hall, and opening a door on the right, the servant ushered him into a parlor and withdrew.

A soft light pervaded the high-ceiled apartment which was furnished in the richest style.

"She keeps in the golden web, I see," chuckled the visitor, taking in the luxury by which he was surrounded. "I know when she couldn't afford this, and I dare say she hasn't forgotten it, either. I wonder if she is the Florette of old? And how will she receive me? Will she—"

His thoughts were broken by a step, and the next moment when he turned toward the door he found himself face to face with Mrs. Van Gordon, the mistress of the house, and a beautiful woman of past thirty. She entered the room shutting the door behind her with a backward motion of her hand, and turned on the gas.

The little man stood watching her, and when she turned toward him, his eyes got a sudden gleam.

"Well, what is it?" asked the woman. "You send up your card and proceed to take possession of the house with very little ceremony."

The man smiled.

"I am at a loss to guess your mission," she went on. "Your name is Benjamin Belden, the card tells me. I do not know you, sir."

"You do not know me?" echoed the man. "What a poor memory you have!"

The young wife of Joel Van Gordon the millionaire leaned toward her visitor and looked him in the face.

"Where did I ever see you?" she asked.

The visitor thrust one of his hands into his bosom and drew forth a folded paper.

"Let this speak for me," he replied, coolly unfolding the document before the astonished woman's eyes. "Ah! you see they have printed it in good big letters, which one who runs can read. Here it is. Do me the kindness to read it for yourself."

The next moment the woman had the paper thrust into her hands, and then, with a start that took all color from her face, she saw the large head-line:

TWENTY THOUSAND FRANCS REWARD.

"Won't you read it?" asked the man with a grin, for Mrs. Van Gordon was staring over the paper at him. "Do me the favor of reading it through. I am in no hurry, and I want you to be thoroughly informed."

Her eyes went back to the paper which was printed in two languages—French and English—but they did not tarry there long.

The sight of a certain name was enough for her.

"In God's name, when did you give them the slip?" she exclaimed.

A low laugh rippled through the man's lips.

"You know me now, do you?" he cried.

"Yes, yes!"

"But you don't receive me with any demonstrations of delight. You don't throw yourself into my arms, nor—"

"Hush!" and the woman's fingers closed like the talons of a hawk on his arm. "I think you might have kept an ocean between us."

"All for your benefit, eh?"

She dropped his arm and started back.

"How minutely the paper in your hands describes me!" he went on. "And it mentions you, by the way, ha, ha! Ten years change one, especially when that one has lived under the suns of New Caledonia. La Petite Roquette did

not spoil your beauty. You had enough left to catch the golden nabob of New York—"

She sprung forward, flashing like a tigress.

"What is it you want?—how much?" she cried.

"How much?" he echoed with another grin.

"You don't think I'm here for money, do you? I am no robber, Florette. I only want that which belongs to me. *I am here for my wife!*"

CHAPTER II.

THE BLACK HOODS.

MRS. VAN GORDON did not make a sound.

She looked at the man steadily for a moment, then stepped back to the door, and slipped a catch which locked it.

Benjamin Belden saw every movement.

"You want your wife, do you?" said the beautiful woman as she came forward again and stopped directly in front of him. "Why didn't you keep her when you had her?"

"They wouldn't let me," was the answer. "When the law sends the husband to New Caledonia and the wife to La Petite Roquette, I'd like to see the marriage relation kept up."

"Did the law serve you this trick?"

The man looked astonished, and his black eyes seemed ready to bounce from his head.

Dora Van Gordon was coolness itself.

"Do you deny it?" he suddenly exclaimed.

"Deny what?"

"That you were never Florette."

"I am Mrs. Van Gordon."

"Of course," sneered Belden. "You probably like that name better than the one they wrote once on the books of La Petite Roquette Prison. You caught an old man with your arts, and you have more than a million under your thumb. I am not Jean Valjen now. My card told you that I am an American citizen, Benjamin Belden. Did you not see that the lower left hand corner of the card was gone? In certain places that means that the visitor calls on *very* important business. You did not see the torn corner, eh, Florette?"

"Florette?" echoed Mrs. Van Gordon, indignantly.

"Yes, Florette! The paper I have given you speaks of you as Florette, the wife of Jean Valjen, a convict sentenced to the penal colony of New Caledonia for life. When he went on board ship, bound for the distant clime, his wife, Florette, entered La Roquette, sentenced, despite her youth and beauty, for a term of twenty years. You asked me a while ago how I slipped through their fingers, and I might inquire about Florette's escape. Would you divulge the secret if I pressed the question?"

"I've had enough of this!" cried the woman. "I don't want to hear any more from you."

"Then you are not Florette?"

"No!"

"You have never been Jean Valjen's wife?"

"No!"

"You were never to prison?"

"Never!"

Benjamin Belden looked thunderstruck.

"I expected to find a cool woman under this roof, but not one with the unblushing effrontery of this Jezebel!" exclaimed he. "She beats a brazen statue. But, by the eternal stars! she sha'n't outwit me in the end."

"Don't you see that you've come to the wrong house?" suddenly continued Mrs. Van Gordon. "This is not the abode of the wife you pretend to be looking for. We don't submit to black-mail here."

"Black-mail?" echoed Belden.

"I call it that. My husband is asleep upstairs, but, if you wish to tell him that I am the Florette you talk about, I will get you an interview. I will also call in his daughter, Miss Marian. Do you wish to test their affection, Mr. Belden?"

"Not now," cried the little man. "I see that all your coolness is put on. You gave up once before; you know when that was, woman. I don't say what I will do. I make no threats."

"Which means that you intend to make trouble," and Mrs. Van Gordon was seen to clinch her hands as her body bent forward. "If you want a contest—if you think you can get a dollar by some game, go ahead. Twenty thousand francs reward for you, I believe? Do you know that it would stimulate some of the best detectives in this county? Mr. Van Gordon has a famous man-hunter for a friend, and I have but to speak the word—"

"To set him on my track, eh?" broke in Belden.

"To have the well-known sleuth, Captain Coldgrip, at your heels!" cried Dora Van Gordon.

The little man drew back; his eyes fairly snapped.

"Is he better than the Captain Javert who ran you down?" he laughed.

"He beats your Parisian detectives a hundred-fold, for Captain Coldgrip never fails! Have a care, Mr. Belden. I have but to speak and the prince of city sleuths will rake in the reward offered for the escaped convict. Mr. Van Gordon is not very well, and I have to go to him."

Dora unlocked the door and threw it open.

Her action was enough to tell him that the interview had been concluded.

"I will go," he said. "You play the coolest hand I ever saw a woman hold. I always knew you for a firm person—I have seen you tried beyond the sea—but, by Jupiter! I was looking for nothing like this."

The semblance of a triumphant smile came to Mrs. Van Gordon's lips; the ex-convict saw it, and the deep-set twinkle in her eyes did not escape him.

She stepped aside to let him pass. He did so and reached the door.

"I may come back," he said, with a look which was not hard to interpret.

"Do as you please. If you force me on the defensive, look out!"

"Is it war, then?"

"If you make it so, yes."

"What would you be willing to pay me, Florette?"

"Not a dollar!"

The answer was a laugh, and almost before it had ceased to sound, Mrs. Van Gordon found herself alone once more, for the front door had opened and shut for the man from New Caledonia.

The millionaire's wife went back into the parlor and dropped into a chair.

The color which her last words had brought to her face had entirely disappeared, and she no longer resembled her old self.

"What infamous fate did this?" she cried. "Why have I believed for years a lie from across the sea? Will he attempt to unmask me after I have threatened to have him hunted down? Yes! He will do more than this. I know the man! But what shall I do?—sit here and let him weave the web of vengeance? Not for the wealth of the world! I am not powerless if I am a woman. I never lost my strength to deal a crushing blow. Everything is at stake—fortune, reputation—life itself! And all because the life prisoner of New Caledonia has turned up in New York. He was foolish for giving his game into my hands. The time will come when he will curse the blunder."

Five minutes later the young wife of the New York millionaire crept up-stairs and noiselessly opened the door of a richly-furnished boudoir.

A low light burning over a dressing stand, revealed a placid face nestled in a soft pillow.

"She heard nothing, thank Heaven!" ejaculated Mrs. Van Gordon after a moment's scrutiny of the sleeper who was her husband's daughter Marian, and then the door was closed and the woman vanished.

In another part of the house the wife opened a second door and glided into a spacious sleeping-chamber.

A minute later she was bending over a man past middle life—a man with a full face framed in gray whiskers.

He was sleeping with the calmness of a child, and his deep breathing seemed to bring a new gleam into Mrs. Van Gordon's eyes.

A night stand stood near the bed, and on it was a goblet filled with water.

Catching sight of this as she drew back from the couch, the millionaire's wife took from a drawer in the stand a vial containing some reddish liquid.

The next moment she had dropped some of the contents into the goblet, and then watched the water clear until no traces of the union remained.

Having done this, Mrs. Van Gordon stoed from the room, and left the sleeper to himself.

Ten minutes afterward the front door of the house opened to let a woman out. She was so muffled about the head that no one would have recognized her as the millionaire's wife.

The hour was not late, and when Dora Van Gordon reached a certain corner and stepped into a cab, apparently waiting for her, the city clocks were striking nine.

Away went the vehicle, bearing the woman who had settled back into the darkest corner, where she remained as motionless as a statue.

If she thought of her visitor she did not deliver any opinions aloud.

After a long while the cab stopped, and the woman got out.

The street about her was strangely quiet for the early hour.

It was not Broadway with its electric lights, nor the Bowery with its exciting night life and gaslight scenes.

Mrs. Van Gordon walked across the sidewalk toward a tall brick house, which during the day was heavily shaded by some large trees.

A door opened for her without her hand touching the knob, and she disappeared.

Let us follow her.

She passed into a hall, at the end of which she found a flight of steps which, instead of leading to the floor above, led her toward the depths of the earth.

Gathering her skirts close about her, Mrs. Van Gordon went down to another door, which opened into a small room, where she discarded the hat she had worn, and took from a rack on the wall a dark hood, which, when fitted, effectually hid her face.

A moment later she appeared in an underground apartment, floored and carpeted. The walls were here and there adorned with pictures in gilt frames, and three large chairs cov-

ered with black cloth stood by a table in the middle of the chamber. From the ceiling and directly above the table hung a naked sword.

It seemed to trust its weight to a hair, for no supporting power was visible, and, like the blade of Damocles, it threatened to fall at any moment.

Mrs. Van Gordon on entering this chamber hooded in black, was received by two men with their faces concealed like her own.

The eyes seen behind the mask the woman wore looked pleasant when she advanced to the table and took one of the chairs.

"We thought you might not come," came from behind the hood on Mrs. Van Gordon's right.

"When did I fail you?" was the reply.

"Never."

"I thought so! I am here for a new play. The life of the Cobra Circle is at stake."

The listening hoods started visibly.

"I have investigated your fears," continued Dora, touching the arm of one of her companions. "They are groundless. The Broadway sleuth knows nothing. For once in his life he is completely at fault. I don't want him struck, for I may need him myself ere long."

"You?" exclaimed both men at once.

Dora nodded.

"I have come to tell you about a visitor I had to-night. The danger has crossed the sea; the prison hulks of New Caledonia have given up the man who can cut the Cobra Circle in twain. There! don't let your eyes burst from your heads. Let me tell you about my visitor, and, afterward, what I want."

During the next five minutes Dora Van Gordon spoke in low tones to the two men.

She was listened to without a single interruption.

"You know what is to be done?" she said, raising her voice at the close of the narrative.

The Black Hoods bowed.

"There must be no failure," added Dora.

"There shall be none," was the reply.

"After this play the way will be clear. Captain Claude Coldgrip, the city sleuth, will be muzzled and rendered powerless. And our Circle will have at its command the accumulated wealth of a lifetime."

Half an hour later the Queen of the Black Hoods was home again, and the Van Gordon mansion was silent.

CHAPTER III.

THE MISSING LINK.

"WAKE up, Sunshine. Jupiter! you must have had a long trail last night."

"Not long, captain; but, by jingo! I can't keep my eyes open this morning."

"Maybe you're still under Mother Medusa's spell."

"Not by a long shot!"

"You saw her last night?"

"Yes."

"And watched her through the steam that rose above the Witch's Caldron?"

"No! Mother Medusa did not play witch while I was there."

"Who came to see her?"

"The usual crowd."

"And none of the people we want to get at?"

"I think not, captain."

It was ten o'clock on the morning after the events detailed in the previous chapter, and the scene of the conversation just recorded was a small office on a second floor on Broadway.

The man called Sunshine was a person about forty. He was inclined to good looks, although an uncombed beard was not a passport to favor, and his clothes were not of the best material, nor very clean. He had a pair of deep-blue eyes capable of much penetration, and his hands were long and thin, like those of the successful pickpocket.

But Sunshine Sam did not belong to this class of city gentry, though, at the command of the man who addressed him, he would have tried his hand at the business.

A few weeks before the opening of our present romance, he was one of the many loafers who sun themselves like lizards against the buildings and in the parks of New York. He had no calling, and wanted none. Day after day Sunshine Sam, good-natured and "always tired," as his friends said, was seen where the hot rays of the sky-god fell with undisputed power. He seemed to hate the least shade, and a spot of sunshine on a cloudy day was to him a bonanza worth a mine of gold.

His fame extended over the entire city, but he was utterly unconscious of it, and accepted the sobriquet of Sunshine Sam as if it had come to him by inheritance.

We need not say in what manner he had become acquainted with the man whose office he occupied the morning after the council of the Black Hoods.

Captain Coldgrip, the city sleuth, had picked Sam up somewhere, and the sun lizard of New York often found his way to the Broadway office.

He knew the streets of the city after dark as the owl knows the glade after sundown.

He was shrewd, despite his seeming indolence

while the sun shone, and whether the New York detective intended to make Sam a spotter or not, he seemed to see in him a man of value.

"Sam," suddenly continued Captain Coldgrip, after the lull in the conversation in the quiet little office, "if Mother Medusa possesses the powers you ascribe to her, why can't you get her to give us some tips?"

The blue-eyed man shook his head.

"'Tain't no use, I guess, captain," he answered, with a smile. "She could do it, though, if she would; but, hang it all, she never lets me look in the magic mirror. A woman came to the rooms t'other day, a young thing with diamond rings, and all that. She wanted to know what would happen to her within a year. Mother Medusa produced the mirror, and held it for a while in the steam of the caldron. When she took it out she invited the girl up to look. Great Caesar! the result made me leave my chair."

"What was it, Sam?"

"The young woman gave one cry, and fell like one dead at Mother Medusa's feet. Didn't I pick her up and carry her into another room, where I left her lifeless? She saw something in that mirror—something she did not come to see. A coffin, mebbe, or a bankrupt father. Heaven knows what it was. Since then, I don't want to look, though I've thrown out many a hint in my time."

"She's a wonderful woman," the detective suggested.

"That word don't half tell it. Mother Medusa is the only genuine sorceress in New York. The others are shams."

Captain Coldgrip might have continued the talk, if a step had not fallen in the hall beyond the door, and the next moment the knob was turned.

The detective's acquaintance looked once at the well-dressed, elderly man who came in, and picked up his hat.

He never disturbed Captain Coldgrip with his presence when he had visitors.

As the figure of Sunshine Sam disappeared, the stranger came forward with his eyes fastened on the handsome face of the great sleuth.

"Captain Coldgrip, I believe?" he said.

"At your service, sir," was the reply.

"My name is Tolbert; I live in Pittsburg. Although we are entire strangers, a sense of duty to the public impels this visit to you. I believe I have discovered in this city a man whose whereabouts ought to be known to the authorities."

Captain Coldgrip made no reply, but leaned back in his chair as if to give his visitor full license to proceed.

"Yesterday afternoon, about sunset, my daughter and I were enjoying the scene which delights the sight from the center of the great bridge. Desiring to obtain information concerning a prominent structure visible from our point of view, I turned to a man near by and put a question. I had not seen him before, and though we were strangers, he started visibly when our eyes met. In reply to my question he said he knew nothing about the city, and almost immediately turned and walked away.

"I have always had a singular memory of faces. Somehow or other, I have unconsciously cultivated the faculty. When the man walked off I began to think that I had seen him before. I could not get rid of the thought; it grew on me. After awhile I found his face before me, but not in this country. Ten years ago I was in Paris, the guest of a friend who was one of the most noted criminal judges of the city.

"I was present one day at the sentencing of several criminals. Among them was a man, who, for a series of crimes, was condemned to New Caledonia for life. The day before, his wife, a beautiful young woman, was sent to La Petite Roquette for twenty years for assisting her husband in the crimes which had secured his conviction. Now, I am here to say that the man I saw on the bridge yesterday was the identical criminal who, ten years ago in the courts of Paris, heard a life-sentence pronounced against him. I can not be mistaken, Captain Coldgrip. My recollection of faces once seen is too vivid to lead me into an error."

"Who is this man?" asked the New York detective quietly, when Tolbert paused.

"Ah! there is where I am at fault!" was the quick response. "The name has entirely escaped me. My diary will tell, for I made copious entries during my trip abroad. I can give you an exact description of him, both as he appeared then, and as he appears now."

"Who sentenced him?"

"M. Goballe."

"The judge who was found dead in his bath room a few years ago?"

"The same man!"

A smile appeared on Captain Coldgrip's face as he left his chair and walked across the room to a strong desk which stood in one corner.

The man from Pittsburg watched him with unusual interest, and saw him open the desk with the air of a person who knows where to find the very thing he wants.

The city spotter's hand moved straight toward a certain pigeon-hole, and drew forth an envelope marked in a private manner.

Coming back, he dropped into his chair again and leaned toward the anxious Tolbert.

"I may help you to complete your story, which seems to lack nothing but a name," he said, thrusting his fingers into the envelope. "You are right. Judge Goballe did sentence a man to New Calidonia ten years ago. It was on the twenty fourth day of June—"

"The very day!" exclaimed Tolbert.

"Look at that," resumed the sleuth, extending to the Pittsburger a photograph which had been wrapped in a printed bill of some kind.

Tolbert took the picture and leaned toward the window. His hands trembled a little, and his eyes, filled with intense eagerness, betrayed his excitement.

"This is the fellow!" he cried after a second's look. "I saw him ten years ago before my friend, the Parisian judge. I would make oath that I hold in my hand the portrait of— Why can't I think of his name?"

"Was it Valjen?" asked the detective quietly.

"Jean Valjen!" exclaimed Tolbert. "I told Judge Goballe at the time that the addition of another letter would have given us a living model of Victor Hugo's hero. You have added the link which renders his identity complete. I can now say that Jean Valjen, the life convict, is in the United States."

"With twenty thousand francs reward for him," replied Captain Coldgrip, handing to Tolbert the paper he had unfolded. "You will see by that document that Jean Valjen did not like New Caledonia well enough to stay there. He probably wanted to get back to his pretty wife who had been sentenced to La Petite Roquette. I am obliged to you for the information you have brought me, Mr. Tolbert. Do you think Valjen recognized you on the bridge?"

"I am quite sure he did not. Indeed, why should he? I spent two days in the court-room during his trial, but not once did I catch his eye. He is English, I am told."

"English born, though raised in Paris. This bill with the photograph fell into my hands shortly after the escape from the penal colony. I have not stepped aside to look for Jean Valjen; but several members of our secret police have been on the alert."

"He was accounted dangerous in Paris."

"Dangerous in his way," answered the city sleuth with a smile. "His wife was the more dangerous person of the two. She was said to be at the head of an organization which committed scores of mysterious crimes that constantly baffled the French police."

"She went to La Petite Roquette for twenty years."

"But did not serve five."

Tolbert looked astonished.

"Did she escape?" he exclaimed.

"She was very pretty," was the significant answer, and then Captain Coldgrip continued seriously:

Florette Valjen left the prison in broad daylight, and the papers never got the news until six months later. Beyond the doors of La Roquette she disappeared as completely as if the Seine had swallowed her."

At that moment the door of the office opened, and a young man entered.

Walking straight to Captain Coldgrip, he took a small envelope from an inside pocket and delivered it. The detective broke the seal at once, and read this message at a glance.

"Come to me at once. Father is dead." "MARIAN VAN GORDON."

CHAPTER IV.

THE FLUTTER OF A CURTAIN.

"DEAD!" inaudibly exclaimed Captain Coldgrip. "Joel Van Gordon dead?" and then he turned to the youth who had delivered the startling message.

"When did it happen?" he asked.

"That is what we do not know," was the answer. "He was better than usual when he went to bed last night. At seven this morning he was found in his chamber dead on the floor. He was lying on his face, I believe, but Mrs. Van Gordon or Miss Marian can tell you all about it."

"I will come," said the city shadow. "Say to the young lady that I will obey her at once."

The youth went out, and before Coldgrip could speak again, Tolbert leaned quickly forward and touched his arm.

"I do not want to appear inquisitive, especially not about a detective's business, but the young man spoke the name of Van Gordon. May I ask to whom he referred?"

"Certainly. He meant the wealthy Joel Van Gordon, of — avenue. I have just been informed that he was found dead on the floor of his bedroom this morning."

"Foul play, do you think?" questioned Tolbert eagerly.

"I cannot say."

"I used to know a Joel Van Gordon, but this man cannot be he. My Van Gordon went overland during the first rush to California, and, instead of striking it rich, became Marshal of Hangtown."

"The same man," laughed Captain Coldgrip. "This is an age of surprises. Joel Van Gordon has been almost everything during his life of

sixty-three years, sailor, prospector, vigilante, banker, inventor, and what not! Few people are acquainted with his career. Several years ago he took, for a second wife, a beautiful woman who would have captured anybody. She is now the richest widow in New York."

"Where did he find her?"

"She came to him," was the reply. "A golden net catches many fish, you know. But, if you will excuse me now, I will obey the summons I have received from Van Gordon's daughter."

"By the last wife?"

"By the woman he married in California—his first love, as I have often heard him call her. When are you going out of the city?"

"Not for some days," spoke Tolbert with deliberateness. "If you want to see me at any time, you will find me at the Fifth Avenue. I trust you will not forget our friend Jean Valjen, the gentleman from New Caledonia."

"I will recollect him," returned the detective. "He may discover that the twenty thousand francs reward can put a shadow at his heels even here in America."

Five minutes afterward the two men, thrown together by the appearance of a face on the great bridge, separated on the sidewalk below the office.

Tolbert turned down-town but soon wheeled and looked after Captain Coldgrip still in sight, although he vanished in a moment.

"There is one question I would like to have asked Joel Van Gordon, but I will never get to now," he muttered. "Death has sealed his lips forever, but, for all that, I will not call the question unanswerable. Captain Coldgrip tells me that he leaves a daughter, Marian by name. I will some day see what the young lady knows."

And then Tolbert was lost among the human billows that rolled down town.

Meanwhile, Captain Coldgrip, true to his promise to come to Marian Van Gordon at once, was on his way to the dead millionaire's mansion.

He wondered why the young girl had sent for him.

Had death come to Van Gordon in a violent manner? Did Marian, who knew but little about the wicked world around her home, suspect that a crime had been committed?

Dora, the beautiful young wife of the nabob—the woman who had enthralled him in his age with her brilliant black eyes and peachy skin—must be crushed with grief. And it was she who had dictated the message Marian had penned.

When the Broadway sleuth, who was not known at sight in that fashionable locality, rung the bell of the Van Gordon house, he was immediately admitted.

He found before him the youth who had delivered the note at the office. The young man had beaten him to the goal.

"Miss Marian will see you in a minute," said the servant, opening a door on the right of the hall, and Captain Claude stepped into the room where Jean Valjen had lately faced the mistress of the mansion.

As he advanced across the luxurious carpet he detected the flutter of a curtain in the deep bay window—a mere flutter it was, like that produced by a light puff of air.

The drawn shutters rendered the room quite dark, and despite the warmth of the morning without, a chill seemed to lie within the stiffly pictured walls.

Captain Coldgrip did not have time to drop into a chair ere the door he had partly shut opened with a slight noise, and a figure glided into the parlor.

It was the figure of a girl of nineteen as he had seen her often. It was Marian Van Gordon.

A moment followed the opening of the door, and then the Broadway detective took the little hand which was outstretched in silence.

Despite the shadows that filled the chamber, he could see the pale face that looked up to him, and, with it, the swollen eyes and the tear-wet cheeks.

For several seconds Marian stood silent in the presence of her friend, and then whispered:

"You are very prompt. I am so glad you have come. I was afraid Roland would not find you."

"He found me talking to an old friend of your father's," replied the detective.

"Ah! who was he?"

"He calls himself Tolbert; he came to the office to give me some information about a French criminal whom he recognized yesterday, but before he left he told me that he knew your father when he went to California."

"It is Duke Tolbert! I have heard father mention him frequently. He told me once that he had a sealed letter for him in his private safe. It has been there for years, but I will deliver it if Mr. Tolbert will give me the opportunity."

"That will be done, Marian," returned Captain Coldgrip. "I am sorry you sent for me."

This allusion to her father's death affected the girl powerfully for a moment, but she seemed to brush her grief away with an effort, and her hand suddenly ceased to quiver in the detective's grasp.

"I could not send for another," she exclaimed. "It is a terrible thing, and so mysterious. Remember that I make no accusations, Captain Claude—I have not the heart to do anything of the kind—but I felt that I needed you here."

The city sleuth led the girl to a sofa near the bay-window, and resumed:

"Tell me what you know, Marian?"

"It is not much. None of us know a great deal. Mrs. Van Dorn was in her own room when he was discovered, and he had been dead some time. Last night I retired earlier than common, but, oppressed by something I cannot explain, I did not go to sleep immediately. I believe that between eight and nine my chamber door was opened. I saw no one, but the feeling that some one was near—that a pair of eyes were upon me—took possession of my senses. I did not stir until the feeling had passed off; then I found the door shut.

"My next move was to go to father's room. He always left the door unlocked for me to enter to bid him good-night when I retired late. I found him asleep, his night stand near the bed as usual—a little closer, I noticed, than I had ever seen it before. Having seen that he had not left the room since retiring, I went back to bed and fell asleep. This morning at seven o'clock the shock came. Butler, the house servant, entered father's room as usual and found him on his face on the floor, dead! He had not fallen from the bed, for the bedclothes were not disarranged. He was up when death came. The doctor says so, and that is the general verdict. Doctor Gibson, who has been his physician for years, told me this morning that father had had heart troubles which he zealously kept from me. Mrs. Van Gordon confirms the doctor, and so they unite in saying that he died from a sudden attack of that instant destroyer.

"But, Captain Claude, I want to ask you one question," and Marian Van Gordon drew closer to the New York detective as she dropped her voice still lower. "Do men ever write a sentence after the stroke falls?"

Captain Coldgrip gave the girl a look which made her wonder if he did not think her mad.

"What do you mean?" he asked.

"I thought I would startle you," was the reply. "I have said that it was Butler who found him and gave the alarm. He did not do so, however, until he had raised him from the floor and put him back in bed. In one of his hands Butler found a crumpled paper, a paper with an illegible scrawl in pencil, just like a man might write when he found his life going out like water. I have that paper, Captain Claude. Butler gave it to me, and not to Mrs. Van Gordon—I hardly know why. But he might as well have given me a piece of writing in Chinese, for I can't make out a word. Oh, Captain Coldgrip, you were his friend, and I knew not who else to send for. The paper is upstairs, where I placed it for safe-keeping. Do you want it now?"

"If you will get it, Marian."

The girl drew back and crossed the room.

"Maybe you had better come along," she said, looking at him. "Mrs. Van Gordon is up-stairs, and, then, I presume you want to see him."

The next moment the city sleuth was at Marian's side, and the two went up the broad steps together.

Hardly had they left the darkened parlor ere the curtains of the bay window moved again, then they parted, and a woman stepped out!

"That is the man she sent Roland after, is it?" came through her white teeth. "Well, Captain Coldgrip will find his morning visit productive of nothing. He must be careful how he listens to a child in whose veins there is none of my blood, thank Heaven!"

The speaker had the voice, the look and the eyes of Dora Van Gordon.

She had also the mien of the Queen of the Black Hoods.

Already the detective and the girl were on the floor above, and the millionaire's wife stole from the room and went up a private stair.

"This is it," said Marian, putting a piece of paper into the city ferret's hands. "Look what a miserable scrawl it is."

Captain Coldgrip went to the window and unfolded the paper.

The writing, if writing it was, was the most wretched he had ever seen.

CHAPTER V.

SPIDER AND FLY.

DUKE TOLBERT and his daughter, Laurel, had quarters at the Fifth Avenue Hotel.

The Pittsburger appeared to be a man in good circumstances, and at his request he had been given one of the best suite of rooms in the house.

Every day since his arrival in the city he had taken Laurel to the various places of interest, and no money was spared in the little excursions.

He did not tell any one that he had lately lost his wife and Laurel's mother, and that one of his objects was to soften the daughter's grief by travel and a change of scene.

Near the close of the third day after the funeral of Joel Van Gordon—here had been no inquest, and the millionaire had been quietly buried—Tolbert rejoined Laurel in their rooms at the hotel.

The brilliant brown eyes of the young girl lit up suddenly at his appearance.

"What success?" she asked, hardly waiting for Tolbert to remove his hat.

"Very poor—disappointing," was the answer.

"You called at the Van Gordon house?"

"Yes."

"And did not find the letter which Captain Coldgrip said was in the private safe for you?"

"I found nothing."

"Tell me about the visit."

Tolbert took a chair near Laurel, and proceeded in tones that indicated chagrin, if nothing else.

"I found Miss Marian, the daughter, at home," he said. "Mrs. Van Gordon had been called to the lawyer's office. When I mentioned my name to the daughter, who seems to be your age, Laurel, she said at once there was a letter in the safe for me. Her father, fearful that something might happen, intrusted her with the combination some time ago, and had even showed her the letter in a certain pigeon-hole. As eager to carry out the wishes of her father as I was to get the letter, she conducted me to the library, where she opened the safe—a small but substantial one. The next moment she was looking over several sealed packets.

"It is not here!" she suddenly exclaimed, and the face she turned to me was as white as her shroud will be some day. I could not believe it.

"When did you see it last?" I asked, eagerly.

"Last Christmas night, while Mrs. Van Gordon was absent," she replied. "Father had not been well for some days, and he told me of several things to be done by me if he should drop off. He took your letter from the safe and made me promise that I would try to deliver it. Of course I don't know what was in it, but his manner impressed me that it was very important. You see it is not among these papers, Mr. Tolbert," and the young girl showed me the packet she had taken from the pigeon-hole.

"This did not satisfy me. I requested Marian to make a thorough search of the safe in hopes that the letter had been misplaced. She did so, but without result.

"He may have changed his mind and destroyed it," I suggested.

"I think not," she said, slowly shaking her head. "He never destroyed anything he deemed important. But one thing is certain—your letter is not here, Mr. Tolbert, therefore I cannot deliver it. I am the only person in the house who knows the safe combination. Father never placed it in Mrs. Van Gordon's keeping. It is very strange, very strange," and the girl shut the iron door with a look I shall never forget."

Laurel made no reply but looked at her father who could not get over the deep disappointment caused by his visit to the Van Gordon mansion.

"My old friend lived sumptuously," he suddenly continued. "I recollect him when he was Sheriff of Hangtown, a tall, swarthy man in buckskin, ready to adjust a knot under a desperado's ear. A cooler man than Joel Van Gordon never lived. Captain Coldgrip tells me that he broke after he married the second time. He lost all his early coolness, and kept from the world. The daughter looks like him. She has much of his old determination, but her fair brown eyes must be her mother's. I wish you could meet her, Laurel. You would like Marian Van Gordon."

Laurel said something about forming the young girl's acquaintance if they remained in New York, but her father did not hear her.

He sat near an open window which looked out upon the avenue, and all at once he started forward with an excited gleam in his eyes.

"The man!—the same face, as I live!" he exclaimed, and the next second he was on his feet.

"What is it?" cried Laurel, springing up.

"Nothing!" answered Tolbert, in altered tones, as he gently repulsed the breathless girl who had reached his side.

"But you saw some one," persisted Laurel, looking down into the street.

"Did I? Ah! your eyes are better than mine!" laughed the Pittsburgher. "Yes, I saw fifty people. You can see them, Laurel. Did I single out any particular one? No! I had no one to treat with this distinction."

The young girl looked at him with a countenance still pale.

"Did he see the man we encountered on the bridge the other day?" she murmured. "Has Jean Valjen, the French convict, recognized him? I hope not! Captain Coldgrip promised to see that the fellow should be picked up. No, he did not exactly promise, but he thanked father for the information regarding his presence in New York. I trust we will not remain here longer. We need not stay, for the letter father wanted from Joel Van Gordon's safe is missing."

Duke Tolbert became himself again while Marian thought of these things, and ten minutes after his strange action, he was on the sidewalk in front of the hotel.

"I could not have been mistaken," he mentally exclaimed. "I saw the man as plainly as I did on the bridge. Why should he be here? Does he know that I warned the great Broadway detective of his presence in New York, and has he turned on me? I know enough of Jean Valjen, the life convict, to want him away from my trail. He was looking up at the windows of our room when I saw him. Can't I spur the city sleuth on to trip him right away? I must do it! For Laurel's sake, I won't rest while this man is at large and on the lookout."

Tolbert was careful not to quit the spot without a close scrutiny of his surroundings.

He drew back into the building and watched some time in secret, then, believing that Jean Valjen had disappeared, he started down Broadway.

"I guess I have money enough to get the French fox caught," he exclaimed. "All these detectives work for the almighty dollar, and Captain Coldgrip is no exception. I think he needs a little codicil tacked to the twenty thousand francs reward. Well, if a thousand hard Yankee dollars will move him, he shall stir at once."

A short time afterward Tolbert sprung up a flight of steps and tried the door of a certain office on the second floor.

He found it locked.

"Not at home, eh?" he muttered. "Is the city sleuth off on a trail of some kind? This is disappointing. I wanted to see the man, and badly, too."

Tolbert walked away and stopped at the top of the steps which led to the sidewalk below.

"I'll leave a note for him anyway," he went on, taking a memorandum from his pocket. "I will appoint nine o'clock to-morrow for an interview, if he comes back before then. I don't want him to come to the hotel."

For a minute he wrote rapidly on one of the leaves of the book, tore it out, and pushed it under the door of Captain Coldgrip's office.

Then he went down-stairs, and out into the street.

"By Jericho! that's the man who dropped in on the captain the other day!" cried a man whom Tolbert almost elbowed as he left the building. "He's come back on business, but he did not find Captain Claude in. I guess I won't tell 'im that the office is liable to be empty for some time. If I could steer him into Mother Medusa's house, I'd probably get a neat percentage, for, if I don't miss my guess, he's got the rollers, and in good quantity, too."

In less than a minute Tolbert had Sunshine Sam as his heels.

The sun lizard of New York was not exactly on guard when the Pittsburgher came to the detective's office, but he was ready to pick up anything which he thought might enrich him financially, or be of advantage to Captain Claude.

He could have told Tolbert that the little Broadway office might be closed for some time; but beyond this Sunshine Sam knew nothing.

He kept close after the Pittsburgher for some distance.

"I b'lieve I'll try to give him a little diversion," he suddenly said, diving one of his slim hands into a vest pocket.

"I've turned more than one dollar by this card, and there's nothing crooked in the business either."

Sunshine Sam increased his gait, and approached Tolbert who was still moving along, watchful, but no longer very suspicious.

At last he brushed past the Pittsburgher, and then turned with a card between thumb and finger.

"Good-night, sir," said Sam, touching the brim of his hat as Tolbert looked at him. "Mebbe you'd like to consult the great sorceress of the day—Mother Medusa. Try it and be convinced that she's no humbug."

The audacity of the sun lizard seemed to strike Duke Tolbert.

He took the extended card with the air of a man controlled by some irresistible impulse.

"She knows the past and the future," resumed Sam, pleased with the success of his design.

"She finds lost things, traces enemies, and brings friends together. The boss queen of the mystical realm is Mother Medusa. The big-bugs patronize her, and the middle classes come to her doors."

Sunshine Sam thought he had said enough.

Touching his hat again, he stepped back, and walked off before Tolbert could address him.

"I think that's seed sown on good ground," laughed Sam. "He may not go to Mother Medusa right away, but he'll enter her house before he's done with it. Captain Claude will laugh at my trick, but I'm after the percentage—the daddy dollar—all the same."

Because Sam had stepped back, he had not lost sight of Tolbert.

The Pittsburgher looked at the card as he walked slowly from the spot.

It gave in three lines all the information needed by any one who wished to consult a sorceress.

"MOTHER MEDUSA.

"The Only Great Revealer of the Future.

"At Home, No. — S — St."

Sunshine Sam's eyes glittered with delight when he saw Tolbert consult the card.

"I guess I've got him!" he exclaimed.

The following moment the Pittsburgher looked at his watch, then took his bearings from the corner lamp and turned quickly to the right.

"Caught!" cried Sam, darting off with a bound. "He won't stop this side of Mother Medusa's trap!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE WITCH'S TRAP.

THERE was a person besides Sunshine Sam who saw Tolbert, the Pittsburgher, suddenly change his route, and turn his face toward the house occupied by a woman who had become famous among the credulous people of New York.

This individual was a small man who had watched Tolbert from the moment when he left the Fifth Avenue with the intention of seeking Captain Coldgrip.

When he saw Laurel's father fairly on the way to the sorceress, he gave up the chase and plunging down a by-street already nearly dark, disappeared.

The man was Jean Valjen.

"Now's my time to get rid of a dangerous enemy!" he exclaimed, while he hurried along.

"I have discovered that the person who accosted me on the bridge the other day is Duke Tolbert. He recognized me on sight, and one of his first acts afterward was to have an interview with Captain Coldgrip. I know exactly what that meant. He told the Broadway Javert that I am Jean Valjen, life convict Number 6868, lately escaped from New Caledonia, and to-day at large in America with twenty thousand francs on my head. He saw me again to-day, and thinking that the captain was slow to move, he had called to stir him up. Ha, ha, Mr. Duke Tolbert, the Parisian rat did not lose all his teeth while gnawing through the trap that held him for a while. He's got enough left to leave his mark on you, and also on a few others who want things their own way. I lied to you the other day, I know more about New York than you think: I do. Get ahead of Florette's husband if you can! Beat the Parisian rat, beat fate. That is what I say!"

Jean Valjen proved that he knew a good deal about New York, for not long after deserting Tolbert he opened a door between two houses and vanished.

A minute later he reappeared in a dimly-lighted room. Almost at the same moment a door opened and a woman advanced toward him.

"What brings you back?" she asked, stopping in front of the convict who had not recovered from his rapid walk.

"You ought to know, for they give you credit for knowing everything," replied Jean, with a grin. "Tell me whom I have just encountered, and who is now on his way to consult the sorceress of New York."

The woman executed a gesture of impatience and disgust.

"You can't see very far into the future for all, Mother Medusa," continued Jean. "He'll be here in less than five minutes. You want to let me help make his fortune."

"You?" echoed the woman drawing back and looking at the convict.

"That's what I've said," was the answer.

Mother Medusa's eyes appeared to get a flash, where all was calmness a second before.

She stood before Jean Valjen in the garb in which she usually received the worshipers who came to fortune's shrine.

This was a long black dress which reached to her feet and trailed in somber folds behind her when she moved. No sleeves were visible because there were none, and when Mother Medusa had occasion to raise her hand, her visitors saw one of the whitest and shapiest arms in the great city. At each wrist was a gold bracelet fashioned in the shape of a serpent, and there were not wanting those who said that in the pungent odors which rose above the caldron in the witch's audience room, the heads of the golden serpents actually moved.

Mother Medusa was not beautiful in the usual acceptation of the term.

Her flesh was strangely white on the arms, but her face was dark, and above her cheeks beamed two eyes which would have stamped her a mystic personage without the presence of the accessories of black magic by which she was surrounded.

Jean Valjen seemed to know her well, for when she looked at him in astonishment after his last words, he gave vent to a derisive laugh.

"That is enough!" the woman exclaimed, breaking in upon his sarcastic merriment.

"You will not tell me who is coming?"

"I will, Mother Medusa. I've played with you long enough. The visitor about to cross your mystic threshold for the first time is Duke Tolbert."

"Who is Duke Tolbert?" asked the sorceress,

speaking the name in tones which told that it was a new one for her lips.

"He's a nabob from Pittsburg."

"What does he want?"

"A good fortune like the other flies who come to your net."

The sorceress was silent for a moment.

"If he is rich he will pay well for good prophecies," she suddenly cried. "I can give him all he wants."

The ex-convict took a quick step toward the woman.

"To Halifax with your prophecies!" he snarled. "I want this man to have more than such things. He need not go away from here very soon. You understand me, Medusa?"

The look of the sorceress was quickly transformed into a stare.

"What do you mean?"

Jean Valjen showed his teeth in a laugh.

"Where is your head to-night?" he exclaimed. "This man is on my track. He discovered me the other day, and wants to run me down, and send me back to the old prison, and the fever-blasted lands across the sea. Duke Tolbert wants to do this, Medusa. Now, what do you say? Speak rapidly! We haven't two minutes to waste."

Jean Valjen was breathing hard and fierce, like a chased wolf. He was dark of countenance, and quivered while he talked.

"There! there! you heard that!" he went on. "That was the bell. The hunter is at the door. You must stand by me, Mother Medusa. By the eternal heavens! you shall help me clear my path or—"

"Or what, Jean Valjen?" broke in the woman, her slender figure bending toward him while her eyes burned like the sapphires in the heads of golden vipers at her wrists. "If I do not help you, what? Speak!"

Her voice was the voice of command.

The French convict shrunk back.

"I meant no threat," he managed to say while his look belied his tongue.

"No, you are very innocent," laughed Medusa. "You were innocent when they transported you from France. I shall see this man you don't like. Duke Tolbert do you call him, Jean?"

"Yes. He is my enemy and, of course, yours," was the reply. "When I tell you that he has been with the Broadway spotter—"

"With Claude Coldgrip?" asked the sorceress.

"With no one else!"

"That is enough!"

Mother Medusa turned away and Jean Valjen saw the draped figure pass through a door which, shutting, hid her from view.

"Confound it! If I could only spring a trap on him I would feel at my ease," he murmured. "I can't bear anything in this room. Medusa has fixed this house for the successful operation of her magic. There was a time when I could command her; but now, and, in America, she has the best of me. She wasn't always sorceress—no, no! She came from the island which gave Josephine to the world, and her favorite claim is that the witch who told the young queen's fortune was her mother. Pshaw! that is all humbug, but there are thousands in New York who believe her. What will she do with Duke Tolbert? What will she show him in her magic mirror?"

Already Mother Medusa had passed into a chamber, across one side of which hung a crimson curtain that reached from ceiling to floor. The furniture of the place was grotesque; the corners of the tables had griffin heads, and the legs of the chairs were wooden serpents in combat.

As Medusa crossed the threshold of this room a man left a chair and stood before her.

The sorceress stopped and looked at him.

"I see," she said, solemnly. "The heir of the Tolberts comes to lift the veil of futurity."

Despite a secret resolve to be surprised at nothing, the Pittsburger started.

By what magic had the sorceress of New York worked out his name?

"Is it not true?" she went on before he could answer her, and her hand appeared from beneath the folds of the black robe and reached for Tolbert's palm.

"I don't care so much for the future just now," the man said.

"No! it is the past which tries the prophet at this day," smiled Medusa. "Why does Tolbert want to know that which he would like to forget? Why must I show him the trails he has made since he set foot in our great city—the visits to the man who, like an owl, hunts his prey in the night—"

A light cry from Tolbert broke the witch's sentence.

"This is no ordinary woman," he exclaimed. "The man she has compared to an owl is Captain Coldgrip. By Jove! I don't want her to tell too much. The walls of this house may have ears."

Then he looked into the almost fascinating eyes before him.

"I want to find a certain thing which has mysteriously disappeared," Tolbert suddenly resumed. "I am told that you trace lost articles. What is the fee?"

"Ten dollars," responded the sorceress.

The next instant Tolbert held out a gold-piece, which dropped into Mother Medusa's hand and vanished as it touched the palm!

"Next," continued the Pittsburger, "I want to know how a certain person escaped from a prison beyond the sea. Can you tell me this?"

He could not help seeing the eyes of the sorceress glitter like a serpent's.

"The last revelation first," she said. "Shall it be so?"

"As you wish."

Mother Medusa dropped the hand she had been holding all the while, and walked to the curtain.

Passing behind it, she remained out of sight for a few moments, and then came back, dimly revealed in a cloud of smoke which seemed to issue from the mouths of the serpents at her wrists.

"Wonderful!" was Tolbert's inward exclamation.

"The prison beyond the sea is a floating hulk over which flies a tri-colored flag," came through the smoke. "It holds eight hundred men, old and young. Among them is one who is barely thirty, short, active, handsome. His comrades call him Valjen, the Rat. I see him go to his task on land in the morning, and come back to the hulk at night. It is thus day after day, month after month. Now the overseer finds him asleep in his crib; now he is not there! The Rat has escaped!"

"That is true," exclaimed Tolbert. "I want to know how he got his liberty."

"Ah! the rat has sharp teeth," laughed a voice amid the ascending smoke. "I see him in the crib at night. Now he—now—"

A sudden noise like a knocking at the door by which Tolbert had entered the room broke Mother Medusa's sentence.

Still enveloped in smoke, she went forward, turned the knob and disappeared.

"What are you going to do?" grated a voice as Mother Medusa caught the devilish glare of two burning eyes. "You were actually telling him the story of my escape."

"Hush! come with me!" was the answer, and the witch of New York passed down a narrow hall at the end of which she held a door open for the mad convict.

Jean Valjen looked up into her face, hesitated a moment, and then crossed the threshold.

The next instant a sense of suffocation seized him, he turned toward the sorceress, and tottered forward.

Then he reeled like a drunken satyr, threw up his hands, and pitched against the wall.

CHAPTER VII.

THE RAT GNAWS.

SOME time elapsed before the convict recovered from his sudden faint.

When he did so he found himself in a dark room.

"I wonder what Mother Medusa told him?" was his first thought. "By Jupiter! she dare not go too far with me! She can't afford to!"

He found the door which had led him to the threshold of the sorceress's mysterious audience chamber, but it was locked, and would not yield.

Jean Valjen drew back with a bitter malediction.

He waited a while hoping Medusa would come, but the darkened silence was not broken, and he began to grow impatient and uneasy.

"Some other time, my city witch!" he exclaimed. "If you have told Tolbert too much, and you were on the road to it when I heard you last, I'll see you later. Just now I want to get out of this infernal trap. I've business elsewhere."

He proceeded to try the door by which he had entered the house.

To his delight the knob now turned in his hand, and a moment later he inhaled the pure air of night.

Nearly all traces of his recent contact with Mother Medusa's magic had disappeared. His head seemed to swim at intervals, but the night air soon dissipated this feeling, and he was himself again.

Jean Valjen went straight to the bridge.

Bounding up the steps as if eager to put the river between Mother Medusa and himself, he entered a car about to start, and was whisked away.

A few minutes later he entered a house in the heart of Brooklyn, and appeared suddenly to a dark-faced young man who seemed to be waiting for him.

"Well, what is it? You have had an adventure," said the youth looking into Jean's face. "You have seen the New York spotter, I think."

"Claude Coldgrip? I have not seen him," was the answer. "I can tell you, Manuel, that the Broadway office hasn't been open for nearly two days. Captain Claude may be on a trail, but I can't say. Hang these ferrets, anyhow."

"I wish I could," smiled the young man. "They're always interfering with honest people; ha, ha! But what was the rumpus across the river to-night?"

"I was at Medusa's. I went there on very important business. She tried some of her devilish magic on me."

"On you, Jean?" surprisedly exclaimed Manuel. "I thought you were solid with her."

"So did I think," growled the convict, and then without further reserve, he told the story of his visit to the sorceress of New York, and the results which had followed it.

His single auditor gave him breathless attention, and not for several moments after the conclusion of the narrative did the young man speak.

"I can't think that Medusa intends to betray you," he remarked.

"Then, why didn't she hold her tongue?" snapped Jean, and his eyes got a sudden gleam of rage in the gas-light. "She did not have to tell Tolbert, the Pittsburger, that I am actually in New York. Curse the Queen of the Seine! I knew her when she was hunted by the Parisian police, and she cannot have forgotten that the hand of Jean Valjen gave her shelter when she needed it. This is New York, you say, Manuel, though just now we are not in that city. I know it is not Paris."

Jean Valjen left the chair which he had taken at the table opposite his companion, and Manuel looked up and watched him closely.

"I would like to know what Captain Coldgrip thinks!" continued the convict. "I know that Tolbert has been to his office since encountering me on the bridge. He must have told the city sleuth-hound that the man sentenced for life to New Caledonia is in America. But does Captain Claude intend to play for the twenty thousand francs, and does he suspect the relationship which still exists between me and the Widow Van Gordon? I want to know something about this, Manuel. What are your prospects? And Jean came back to the table and looked down into the youth's face.

"They are good," was the reply.

"You are really to be taken into the Black Hoods?"

"I am."

"When?"

"To-morrow night."

A smile overspread the convict's face.

"If you succeed, we will be on the high road to the gold-mine!" he exclaimed. "It will give us a grip on the great American bonanza. You don't want to falter, Manuel."

"When I do, the hand of Jean Valjen shall do its duty," was the prompt retort. "Everything is in readiness for my initiation. I think I have played my cards well—"

"Excellently!" broke in Jean. "The Black Hoods cannot suspect that a link unites us—a link forced under distressing circumstances beyond the sea. She does not dream of such a thing."

"Of course not," replied Manuel, whose dark eyes were aglow in their liquid depths. "She knows nothing of it, and will not until we have won the game. I am not afraid that she will disclose your whereabouts to Captain Coldgrip."

"Nothing of the kind will be done! The sole danger is this:—the Broadway spotter may have taken up the trail on Tolbert's story."

"Where is Tolbert?"

"At the Fifth Avenue."

"Alone?"

"With his daughter—a young girl quite beautiful."

Manuel was reflective for a moment.

"Do you really fear Tolbert?" he suddenly asked.

"Not for what he can do unaided," answered Jean. "If he got important information from Medusa to-night, he might impart it to Captain Coldgrip."

"Then we must seal Tolbert's lips."

This sentence was spoken in most determined tones, and coming from one so young, Manuel looked like a boy, it was enough to startle the convict.

"If the detective's office has been shut for a day, he is at work somewhere," was the abrupt continuance.

"It looks that way."

"What do you suspect?"

Jean Valjen shook his head.

"Night before last the big robbery of the Union Safety's safes occurred. The affair seems to have paralyzed the city spotters. Mulberry street is still excited and puzzled. The captain may be piping that crime."

"It seems to be worthy of his mettle," smiled Manuel.

"But we must know for certain, and that soon, whether he is on that case. As I have announced, he has disappeared. The man who sometimes keeps him company still hangs about the office. He was there to-night, and he it was who decoyed Tolbert to Mother Medusa's den."

"Ah! Sunshine Sam!" laughed the young man. "The fellow isn't as sleepy as he looks, Jean."

"What do you know about him?"

"Nothing, only that he keeps his eyes and ears open for Captain Coldgrip."

"But he acts as the witch's decoy?"

"Sometimes."

"We can't get anything out of him concerning the Broadway sleuth's disappearance?"

"Not a syllable. Sunshine Sam is as true as steel to his master."

"If mother Medusa suspected that he was serving the detective, there'd be a scene, and the sun lizard of New York would have one source of revenue cut off."

"Perhaps," said Manuel.

"By Jericho! she ought to know it!" cried Jean. "I want to cripple Captain Coldgrip in every possible manner. I don't want to get the New York ferret after us, not just now, at least."

"We'll wait till the storm comes," answered Manuel coolly. "I think we will soon be in a position to dictate certain things to certain parties. I wish you had not given yourself away to Dora Van Gordon the night before her husband's death. I don't call it a disastrous play, Jean, not by any means; but I can't think it was for the best."

"It did me a world of good!" declared the convict. "My blood danced in my veins while I stood in her parlor and told her that she was still Jean Valjen's wife. She laughed when I called her Florette. But wait till we tighten the screws, Manuel. Wait till you have the secrets of the Black Hoods in your keeping — then the gold comes, then we make the biggest haul of our lives!"

Jean Valjen leaned back in his chair and looked triumphantly across the table at his companion.

"The city has already forgotten Joel Van Gordon," said Manuel after a minute's silence.

"So it seems."

"What was the estate worth?"

"Two millions."

"And Dora's share?"

"One half by the will."

"Jehu! didn't Florette feather her nest?" cried Manuel with a light laugh.

"She never did half that well in Paris," replied Jean. "She netted the old nabob and then — Well, I guess you have an idea what followed, Manuel."

The young man nodded! "They can't prove any thing," he remarked. "Florette's schooling in Paris was the making of her, Jean. She is more beautiful than ever, don't you think?"

"Yes!" growled the convict. "America has agreed with her, and the Van Gordon millions have given her a new lease of beauty."

At this juncture Manuel consulted his watch, and lookek toward the door. "I am going," he said to Jean. "I have an engagement across the river. You will not go back?"

"Not to-night," replied the convict. "You will let nothing in our interest escape you. Sunshine Sam is well known to you, Manuel, and Captain Coldgrip."

"All the rest, as well!" smiled the youth.

A minute later Manuel was out in the street, and Jean Valjen was enjoying a cigar in meditative mood.

"There's several ways of silencing troublesome people," he murmured between the puffs. "When Manuel is among the Black Hoods, I will show a hand whi h cannot be trumped."

Already Manuel was walking toward the river.

"This is better than having a number and a beat from ship to shore!" decided the young man. "I don't know how the affair will end, but let me get my grip on my victim, and I'll dictate terms which Jean Valjen never dreams of."

Not far behind Manuel walked a man who had seen him emerge from the house where he had left the Parisian sport.

When he increased his gait in hopes of not missing the next car across the bridge, the man walked a little faster.

Manuel entered the car; so did the stranger.

The eyes of the two men met, but for a moment, and then casually.

Manuel was in tip-top humor, and when the car landed him in New York, he left it in high glee.

"Maybe we'll clip your wings by and by," muttered the man who had dogged him across the river. "The trail deepens. Tolbert did not know that Jean Valjen picked up an old friend when he landed in New York."

CHAPTER VIII.

SUNSHINE SAM'S MISSION.

THE nocturnal sleuth who had young Manuel under espionage did not track him long after reaching New York.

He followed Jean Valjen's pard to a well-known hotel near the center of the city and there left him, as if he was satisfied with his bit of shadowing.

"It is a pretty double game you are playing, my young man," inaudibly observed the spotter as he hurried away, eventually turning into Broadway. "I think I have picked up a link in the chain to-night, but time will tell."

He kept on up the great artery of New York until he reached a hallway into which he darted, and bounded up a flight of steps.

The following moment he let himself into a small room on the second floor, and shutting the door behind him turned on the gas.

The room was the Broadway quarters of Cap-

tain Coldgrip, and the man was the famous sleuth himself.

"What is this?" exclaimed Captain Claude, catching sight of a bit of paper which had evidently been pushed in under the door by some party on the outside, and then he read the following brief note:

"CAPTAIN COLDGRIP:—I would like to see you at your office at nine to-morrow (the 10th). *Important.*
"TOLBERT."

"So, Tolbert has been here—Tolbert, the Pittsburgher," murmured the detective. "He has appointed an hour which does not suit me to appear here. I shall see him at the hotel. I presume it makes but little difference to him, especially if nobody about the house recognizes me. It is time for Sam to turn up with a report of some time. I will wait a little while for him."

Had the reader been Captain Coldgrip's companion in the room at that particular time, he would have noticed that the curtains fitted the window very closely. In fact, not a ray of light escaped from the place, and no one at the door could have told that the office was inhabited.

If Sunshine Sam had an engagement with the New York ferret at that hour, he showed no signs of punctuality, but Captain Claude appeared to have a little time on his hands, for he began to wait with more patience than many men would have exhibited.

All at once he thrust one hand beneath his vest and drew forth a memorandum-book, from which he took a bit of paper that bore marks of numerous folds.

Across it ran a wild and straggling line, light here and heavy there, traced by a pencil which seemed to have broken at the right-hand end of the paper.

The writing, if writing it was, looked like the rude attempts of a child, but there was something striking about it, perhaps because it was worthy of being treasured by the New York shadower.

Captain Coldgrip looked at the paper, not like a man trying to solve a puzzle, but with an air of victory which told that the solution had been obtained by downright hard work.

His deep eyes grew brilliant.

"It was a mystery for hours!" he exclaimed, holding the paper before him. "I never worked so hard in all my life. At first it was nearly as dark to me as the inscription on the obelisk. But letter by letter I mastered it, and now it is as readable as though it was printed in Roman characters. Marian knew what she was doing when she kept this paper for me. What a thoughtful girl she is! A thousand girls in her place, and under the circumstances, would have made known the find in the dead hand; but she thought of me, kept her own counsel, and swore the house servant to secrecy. I think I know more about Joel Van Gordon's death now than I did when Marian summoned me to the house. This paper tells something, but not enough. It sets me on the deepest and darkest trail I have ever been called to. I have to meet and beat, if I can, some of the most desperate people in this country. I have pitted against me beauty, coolness, villainy and mystery. It is a big fight; your biggest, Claude Coldgrip. See that the legions do not win. Stand between the orphaned girl and the gold ghouls. Don't forget for a moment that Joel Van Gordon, ere he died, made you the executor of vengeance."

There was a footprint beyond the door, which the detective seemed to recognize, for he slipped the paper in his pocket, crossed the room and pushed back the catch.

The next instant the door opened and the figure of Sunshine Sam came in.

As the reader will recollect, we last saw Sam delivering Mother Medusa's card to Tolbert. More than an hour had passed since that event, and the sun lizard of New York had come back to his cool-headed master.

Sam was not surprised to see the detective at home, and nodding him a lazy good-night, he took a chair and waited for Coldgrip to speak.

"Who's been here?" asked the captain.

"The man who called the other morning."

"Tolbert?"

"The gentleman stopping at the Fifth Avenue."

Sunshine Sam did not see fit to tell Captain Claude that he had tolled the Pittsburgher to Mother Medusa's den."

"Were there no other callers?"

"Yes, one this afternoon."

"Well?"

"I don't know who she was."

"A lady, then?"

"A lady. She wore a close, greenish veil. She got out of a carriage at the corner below, and went back to it."

"Are you sure she wanted to see me?"

"I am. There were footprints in the dust before the door after she went away."

"Do you think she was young, Sam?"

"Young and in mourning."

"Why in mourning?"

"Her dress was deep black."

"Dora Van Gordon," mentally decided the

detective. "She was unfortunate in finding me absent, but, never mind; the next time I may be in to receive her."

Then he turned to Sunshine Sam again.

"Sam, you told me once that you knew the west side like a book," he said.

"If I don't, captain, I'm blessed if I know anything," was the quick response. "I've sunned myself all over that part o' Gotham. You find me at home when you talk about it."

"Do you know a two-story brick house with a crescent-shaped transom over the old-fashioned double door?"

"A house with three big trees in front of it?"

"That is it."

"Well, I ought to!" cried Sunshine Sam. "About ten years ago that old house got a bad name."

"A bad name, eh?" repeated Captain Claude.

"Yes."

"What about it?"

"It was inhabited by a hunchbacked Italian named Ladroni. He used to keep a lot of little boys, who played violins in the streets. The neighbors used to say that he whipped the brats unmercifully. Well, one day old Ladroni disappeared, and that was the last of him. Some time after they found two little skeletons in the cellar, and the verdict was that they were the bones of two of the little fiddlers. You were out West on a trail at the time, captain, but you may have heard of the affair."

"I know something about old Ladroni, Sam," replied Coldgrip, with a smile. "So he occupied the house with the crescent transom?"

"He did."

"Have you ever inspected it?"

Sunshine Sam was seen to give a slight start.

"I've been beyond the old door," he admitted.

"Lately?"

"Within the last year."

"Who occupies the place now?"

Sam hesitated, but the next moment Coldgrip leaned forward, and looked him in the eye.

"Well, Ladroni is there!" confessed the sun lizard.

"I thought so," smiled the Broadway spotter.

"The old Italian has come back, and is sailing under false colors. I did not know you had discovered it, Sam."

"It was an accident," returned Sam, showing his teeth. "I stumbled on the old padrone in the oddest manner possible, but I need not tell how here. You don't want a story, Captain Claude."

"Not now. What I want is a man who knows the interior of the house. You are familiar with it, and you are the fellow I'm looking for."

"I'm afraid—"

"Afraid that you know the place too well, eh?" broke in Coldgrip. "I'll risk that part of it, Sam. Now, sir: to-morrow night, at the hour of nine, you must be beyond the door of the old house."

"Jehu!" exclaimed the sun lizard, almost quitting his chair as his eyes dilated. "Why, the place isn't the safest spot in New York."

"You need not make oath to that, Sunshine. Listen. I say that at the hour of nine you must be on the inside."

"How am I to get there?"

"Suit yourself about that."

Sam made no reply.

"You are to manage the affair so as to be able to witness all that transpires under the Italian's roof after your entrance. If an initiation of a certain kind takes place, you are to see it. You are to count the persons who take part in it, and photograph them on your mind. No detail is to be permitted to escape."

Sunshine Sam waited breathless for the detective to conclude.

"Is—that—all?" he asked in tones as ludicrous as they were dismal.

"No," answered Captain Claude. "You are to get out of the house in good health."

"That's the hardest part of the bargain!"

"It is, indeed. You have never failed me yet, my man. I put implicit trust in you. This is no ordinary game. I put before you all the dangers of the enterprise I propose. I want this thing done and done well. I have the best of reasons for not going myself. One of them is my lack of knowledge of the interior of the padrone's house. The spy, to be successful, must know it as you do. He must know how to get in and how to get out. What do you say, Sam?"

Captain Coldgrip leaned back in the chair and looked at the man before him.

"What will the sun lizard do?" he asked himself. "Will he fail me?"

"Well, captain, you sha'n't look elsewhere for another man. I'm the rat that will get into the padrone's trap."

Captain Claude burst into no expressions of delight. He knew Sam too well for that.

"If they catch you—but they must not—remember, not a word about me!" he said, bending toward Sunshine Sam.

"Not a syllable," was the answer. "When shall I report?"

"As soon as you are out of the trap."

Sunshine Sam got up and stood before the Broadway ferret.

"If I never report," he went on, looking seriously into Captain Claude's face, "don't forget the old woman on Canal street."

"Not for a moment, Sam. But you are going to report, I know it! You've been in the lion's den before, and you've always come out."

"So far always on top," laughed Sam. "But the hounds catch the shrewdest fox in the end. Ah! good-night, captain," and the detective's right-hand man touched his hat by way of parting salute, and went down the stair.

"Brave as a lion!" cried Coldgrip. "That man is worth his weight in gold. He has nobody to think of in the world, but the old rag-picker on Canal who is no kin of his. Much depends on his adventure to-morrow night. If they find him, his life won't be worth a breath; if he is successful, I will solve the Van Gordon mystery, and baffle the ghouls of New York."

Then the light was lowered, and the Broadway office had no tenant.

CHAPTER IX.

WOMAN AND WOMAN.

MRS. DORA VAN GORDON bore the distinction of being the richest young widow in New York.

The sudden and startling death of her husband, an event which we have chronicled in a previous chapter, placed a million in her hands.

She was yet young, and strikingly beautiful, and those who knew Joel Van Gordon's partiality for women were not surprised when she insnared him with her brilliant eyes and fascinating manners.

Marian was the retired adventurer's only child.

She secretly opposed the second marriage, but knowing her father's temperament, she dared not give expression to her opinions. But she resolved that she would never give to the new Mrs. Van Gordon a tithe of the love which she had bestowed on the real mother.

Joel Van Gordon noticed the lack of warmth between the two women, and accounting for it in the right way, he did not upbraid his daughter.

Perhaps before he was long married he tired of the woman who had won him; but Dora still swayed him as if by the workings of a spell.

He knew but little about her past, and that little was what she had told him.

Now and then Dora dropped words which told him that she had dwelt for a time in Europe, and her French was the French of a native Parisian.

Thus it was that, here and there, the millionaire caught glimpses of his wife's past, but he never suspected the truth. Never? We cannot, dare not say this.

Dora made frequent visits which kept her out late.

As Joel Van Gordon cared but little for the opera, the young wife went alone.

She claimed to belong to a certain order, very secret, and composed of the wives of the wealthy. Its meetings were held at irregular intervals, and they sometimes kept Dora out until the midnight hour.

Did Joel Van Gordon suspect that these nocturnal trips meant more than his wife told him? Was he so blinded by love and infatuation that he could not suspect and analyze?

He might have hired a private detective and had Dora shadowed.

Captain Coldgrip came sometimes to his house, but he never mentioned his wife's absences to the Broadway sleuth.

For all this the millionaire must have discovered something.

Marian noticed before his death that he aged rapidly. She found him frequently at the private safe in the library; she saw him often at his desk with bowed head and quivering hands.

The shadow of a sorrow was over Joel Van Gordon. There was no doubt of it.

And Marian traced it to the woman who had been elevated to the position of mistress of the house—"adventuress," she sometimes called her.

One day, while Dora was absent, the millionaire was discovered coming out of his wife's private boudoir.

His face had lost every vestige of color, and his steps were unsteady.

From that day he began to change; he lost his vivacity of manners, and all about the house exchanged looks which possessed a certain meaning.

What had the millionaire discovered in his wife's room?

If the visit had unearthed a closet skeleton, he did not betray himself.

Marian drew closer to him after that, and as her love for him increased, her dislike of Mrs. Van Gordon grew apace.

It was natural.

We now know why the paper found in the hand of the dead millionaire, the miserable scrawl which Captain Coldgrip professed to have deciphered, did not fall into the clutches of the Queen of the Black Hoods.

The servant who found the last message disliked Dora as Marian did, and thus he delivered his find to the daughter and not to the wife.

The girl had studied the scrawled characters, but in vain. She was not used to deciphering such things but she knew a man who ought to be an adept at it.

Of course this person was the New York ferret, her father's friend Claude Coldgrip, and, as we know, she sent for him soon after the terrible scene at the house.

"If I could discover what became of the letter father once put in the safe for Duke Tolbert, I would feel that a step had been taken," murmured Marian several days after the funeral. "It was there not long ago, for he admonished me not to forget it if anything happened. I cannot believe that any one held the safe combination but myself, yet the paper and none other has disappeared. What became of it?"

This was always the question with which Marian ended her reflections. It met her whenever she thought about the missing letter; it was a puzzle she could not solve.

It was the night which witnessed Captain Coldgrip's last interview with Sunshine Sam, and the hour long afterward.

Marian Van Gordon heard the front door of the house open and close with little noise, and the next minute a catlike footfall announced that Dora had entered her room.

If the millionaire's daughter had watched the widow, she would have seen her advance to a dressing-stand upon which lay several letters which had been delivered during her absence.

Hastily running them over, the Queen of the Black Hoods selected one and proceeded to tear it open.

"What is this?" she suddenly exclaimed, her eyes seeming to ignite. "Does he pretend to address me after the interview we've had. He does not know that I am as powerful here as I once was elsewhere. The man is a fool!"

Then Dora leaned toward the light and read the following:

"You don't want to carry things with too high a hand. There are parties who know too much and you can't afford to laugh at them. The writer of this letter is just now in need of money, and he calls on you for help. If you will inclose a signed check in blank to the address given below, you will confer a favor on an old acquaintance, and make things pleasant for your own future. A word to the wise is sufficient. There must be no delay in this matter. Immediate!

BENJAMIN BELDEN,

"No. — street Brooklyn."

"The infamous wretch!" hissed Dora, clinching her hands. "Does he expect to black-mail me because—because I once knew him across the sea? This is his first stroke. I will take care that he attempts no others. Why didn't the dungeons of New Caledonia hold the scoundrel? Why have I believed a lie all this time when I had at my command money enough to hunt him to the end of the world? Wants money does he? Wants to get his fingers on me for the future! I see through the whole scheme. I will not be bled to the extent of a dollar, Jean Valjen. I am not powerless in New York. You come to the wrong person for blood-money. Florette is ready to meet you. Aha! you will wish before the week's out that the fever had seized you in the prison hulk in the tropics."

Dora folded the letter and held it in the flame of the gas-jet until it fell in ashes to the floor.

Her pearly teeth were clinched and her eyes shone like sapphires.

She was Florette again—Florette, Queen of the Seine, and once the beautiful prisoner of La Petite Roquette!

The other letters did not excite her. She went through them hastily, threw them aside, and unlocked a drawer in the dressing-stand.

"I want to see this man show his hand," she went on. "I thought he would not rest under the answer I gave him when he came here. You can't win, Jean Valjen. You might as well go back to Paris, and enter the old ranks. I had thought of putting Captain Coldgrip on your track, but I'll meet you with another force. The girl who is sleeping in another part of the house had made the Broadway sleuth her confidant. She told him more than he ought to know; she gave him a paper of some kind—a paper for which I would give a great deal. Why didn't I know there was some writing in his hand while he lay dead on the floor? I was a fool!"

Dora stopped and looked toward the door.

"The house is quiet," she suddenly continued. "There is nothing to prevent me from taking another look for it."

With an eager gleam in her eyes she stole from the little chamber, and passed noiselessly into the library just beyond.

A full moon suspended over the city like a shield of silver let a flood of weird light into the room. Some of the rays fell upon the door of the private safe, toward which, with a cautious look around, Dora advanced without a sound.

The next moment the figure of the beautiful widow was crouched at the door of steel, and her jeweled hands were at work.

She seemed to know the combination as well as Marian.

After a little while she opened the door, and the moonlight revealed the interior of the safe.

"I may have overlooked it," mentally ex-

claimed Dora. "I will take my time to it now. This hour belongs fully to me."

For the next few moments the Queen of the Black Hoods ransacked the safe but in a systematic manner.

She took the interior arrangement by pigeon-holes, and the contents of each were carefully examined.

Suddenly the almost noiseless opening of a door startled Dora. As quick as a spring she turned her head, then sprung up and faced the entrance.

The next instant she stood face to face with Marian Van Gordon!

She was discovered!

Marian was as much startled as the woman who confronted her with the mien of a tigress.

The girl had not expected to find any one in the library, and the unexpected discovery had drawn a light cry from her.

The open safe, the papers on a chair near by, and those in Dora's left hand, all visible in the silvery moonlight, were enough to deprive the young girl of breath.

Dora took the initiative.

All at once she came forward, her flashing eyes fastened on Marian, and her voice almost hoarse with passion when she spoke.

"What do you want here?" she cried.

The words seemed to bring the millionaire's daughter back to her senses. They went through her like a thrill.

"Why are you here?" asked the girl.

An instant later the Queen of the Hoods threw down the papers she clutched, and her hands caught Marian savagely.

"I have a right here," she cried. "Maybe you want to send for the Broadway sleuth again? You want to place me under suspicion by bringing him under this roof. Beware, girl! If you want war, I accept; but I tell you here that I will crush you like an egg-shell! You don't know the woman your father married."

"I do," retorted Marian, firmly. "I know that she killed him without mercy. I know—"

The sentence was never finished, for Dora's white fingers fastened on the girl's throat, and she was forced mercilessly against the wall!

CHAPTER X.

DERRINGER ARGUMENT.

THE next day at nine o'clock a plain-looking man appeared at the clerk's desk of the Fifth Avenue Hotel and inquired for Duke Tolbert, the gentleman from Pittsburg.

"Mr. Tolbert!" exclaimed the clerk. "Why, don't you know, sir? The gentleman did not come in last night, and his daughter is almost distracted."

The clerk did not know that the person who addressed him was Claude Coldgrip.

"Ah, if that is the case, I would like to see the daughter," he exclaimed.

Several minutes later he was ushered into the presence of a young girl whose face bore traces of a sleepless night. She left a sofa as the detective appeared at the door, but checked herself suddenly in the middle of the room.

Laurel Tolbert and Captain Coldgrip had met for the first time.

"My father!" burst from the girl's throat.

"What news have you of him?"

Captain Claude was obliged to confess that he had but just heard of Tolbert's disappearance; but when he proclaimed his identity, Laurel's eyes lit up with hope.

"I know the man we encountered on the great bridge had a hand in it!" she asserted.

"Father recognized him as a criminal whom he once saw sentenced to New Caledonia for life, and I will never forget the man's look when he was addressed. Yesterday evening father saw somebody in the street from your window, and shortly after he left me. Since then I have not seen him. Oh, Captain Coldgrip, what has become of my father?"

Here was another mystery, and one with which the name of Jean Valjen was connected.

"Have you seen the ex-prisoner since the meeting on the bridge?" asked the detective.

"I cannot say for certain. Yesterday in Battery Park I caught a man noticing us; but I did not get to scrutinize him."

"Your father was at my office after he left you," resumed the detective. "He left an appointment on paper for nine o'clock this morning, but not here. He disappeared after that. It is very strange."

"It is darkly mysterious," said Laurel. "Yesterday he called on Marian Van Gordon to get the letter which was said to lie awaiting him in the millionaire's safe."

"Did he get it?"

"No, it was not there!"

"Miss Marian told me that it was."

"So it was at one time, perhaps, but she could not find it," answered Laurel quickly.

Captain Coldgrip made no reply.

"Father has had of late years a mania for consulting fortune-tellers and so-called astrologists," continued the girl. "I have fears that he fell among such people last night. They are not over honest, as a rule, I have heard. Their houses in many instances are traps for the wealthy and the unwary. What do you know about the prophets of New York?"

A smile, faint but discernible, appeared at the corners of the detective's mouth.

"They are not above their class in duplicity," he replied. "Some of the biggest humbugs in necromancy inhabit this city. Into the hands of several I know I would not want to fall myself. Did you hear your father mention any particular one?"

"He spoke of several whose advertisements he saw in the paper. Among them was a person called the Seeress of Martinique."

"In other words, Mother Medusa," smiled Captain Claude.

"You know her?" ejaculated the girl.

"The whole city does that."

"Well, what of her?"

"She is at the head of her class, and, if one is to believe all he hears, she has done some wonderful things."

"Do you believe?" asked Laurel with rising curiosity.

"No. I'm no believer in these people," was the response. "Medusa knows that I don't place any credit in her magic. If your father went to her we will know it. I will begin at once."

"A thousand thanks! May Heaven reward you!" exclaimed the pale girl. "I am now alone in this city. It remains to be seen whether I am an orphan."

Captain Coldgrip's last words were those of cheer ere he left Laurel, and as he stepped into the street a murmur passed his lips.

"Still at work, Jean Valjen," he said. "You seem to have two strings to your bow. You were noted for your diversity of talent in Paris, and coming to America has robbed you of none of it. Of course you were the person Laurel noticed in Battery Park, and the man seen by Tolbert from the window last night. You know that you were recognized on the bridge, and you want to silence the man who saw you sentenced to the tropical prison. Be careful, my Parisian rat, or I'll give you a free ride back to Paris."

Captain Coldgrip was hard to recognize in the garb he wore, and when, soon after leaving Laurel, he rung the bell of Mother Medusa's abode of magic, the few who saw him knew him not.

When he found himself in the audience-chamber of the seeress, he saw the curtains part and Medusa stood before him.

"Have you lost a scent?" she exclaimed, changing color as she halted before the detective. "You cannot deceive the mystic eye, Captain Coldgrip."

He was recognized!

"I don't want to deceive you, Medusa," was the quick answer. "I am not here to keep you from the next customer who is probably now at your door. I want a little information."

"Is that all?" laughed the seeress. "What can I do for you, my Broadway hound?"

It was not the detective's first visit to Mother Medusa's place as the familiarity indicated.

He had been an occasional visitor beyond the precincts, but never when business connected with the detection of crime could not take him thither.

Medusa seemed to dread his coming. Perhaps it was because of his calling, and she had told him once that she did not like detectives.

On the present occasion the city sleuth did not keep the sorceress in suspense.

"You had a visitor last night," he said.

"I had seven," was the reply.

"About six of them I care nothing. I am here to know something concerning the seventh."

"Well?"

"One of your patrons was a man named Tolbert."

Medora was seen to give a slight start.

"He came here to consult you. You dealt with him for the usual fee."

"I did, Captain Coldgrip. The man was here."

"At what hour?"

The sorceress reflected for a moment and then named a certain time.

"Did your answers please him?" asked the ferret.

"I cannot say."

"What did he want to know?"

The woman seemed to draw back as she looked the prince of detectives in the eye.

"Why all this questioning?" she asked. "You ought to know that I never betray the wants of my customers."

"Certainly not; but this is something important to me," answered Captain Claude with peculiar emphasis. "I am here to know what brought Duke Tolbert to this house, and when he left."

Behind the silken lashes a pair of jet-black eyes were seen to get a momentary flash, but while the detective looked steadily at the woman, the light faded.

"He wanted to trace a certain paper which was in a private safe not long ago," replied Mother Medusa after a brief silence.

"Is that all?"

"Yes," assured the sorceress, promptly.

"He did not want to trace a certain man once condemned for life to the penal settlement of New Caledonia?"

"He did not."

"Well, what became of him afterward—after the answers, I mean?"

"He went away."

If the detective intended to speak soon in reply he was prevented by the silvery tinkle of a bell overhead.

"Answer the call," he said to Medusa. "I am in no hurry. The visitor may want your services immediately."

The next moment the sleuth dropped into a chair, and watched Medusa glide across the room and beyond the door.

"She daggers the truth whenever it suits her purpose," he smiled to himself. "I have not studied this female Cagliostro for nothing. Ah! whose voice was that?"

He leaned toward the door with a sudden gleam of excitement in his eyes, but all was quiet beyond the portal, and the sound was not repeated.

Medusa had encountered a man in the hall, a short, rather thick-set personage, active as a cat, as his movements indicated, and the possessor of eyes once seen never forgotten.

"You are alone? Good!" cried the man, catching Medusa's wrist. "By Jove! you did do me a service last night, after all."

"Still your tongue!" was the warning, and the seeress threw a glance toward the door leading into the audience-room.

The man started, and his rather boisterous voice dropped to a whisper.

"Some one in there?" he asked.

"Somebody you don't want to see."

"Gods! then I can guess his identity. When did he come, and what fetched him? I don't want to see him, you say? There's just where you're off, Medusa. I do want to see the man in there; but only once."

He laid his hand on a belt he wore under his coat, and took a step toward the door.

In an instant the sorceress was after him.

"Don't be a fool, Jean Valjen!" she cried, clutching his sleeve. "You don't want to meet the man in yon room, though I suspect that a glimpse of you just now would delight him. What were you going to say awhile ago? How did I assist you last night?"

"By Jupiter! that's innocence!" cried the ex-convict, drawing back and laughing in tones which reached the man in the chamber of sorcery. "No, you don't know that Tolbert has not come back to the Fifth Avenue. Of course you are ignorant of the cause of his disappearance. Well, by Jove! Medusa, you take the prize for acting."

"Is he really missing?" asked the sorceress. "Do you tell me the truth, Jean Valjen?"

"Do you think I'd lie?" was the answer. "Of course he's missing. What if they'd track him here? The man in yonder is the best sleuth-hound on this continent. And only a door stands between us. He wants me, and he's looking for Tolbert, too. Give me a chance. I'll never get another half so good. By the gods! I'll take it whether you say so or not!" and Jean Valjen broke from Medusa's grasp and rushed toward the closed door, in his hand a cocked six-shooter.

The sorceress stood like a statue.

The convict was already at the portal.

"Call him out, Medusa," he sent in audible tones over his shoulder to the woman who watched him in horror, and the revolver went up and was steadied in front of a ferocious face.

"You don't want to meet him," protested the seeress, coming forward. "Captain Coldgrip has never been matched, and you—"

The sentence was broken by the sudden opening of the door, and the next second Jean Valjen had a polished derringer thrust in his face.

"Silence and surrender, Jean Valjen," came over the leveled weapon. "This is a game two can play at. You were eager to see me, I understand. I am here!"

The convict's answer was a stare.

He was at the sleuth's mercy!

CHAPTER XI.

THE WARNING.

THE sudden appearance of Captain Coldgrip to the crook of two continents was as the dropping of a thunderbolt from a clear sky.

If he had not opened the door Jean Valjen's impetuosity would, in all probability, have carried him beyond the threshold, and there would have been a scene in the audience-chamber.

The convict recoiled from the cocked revolver held almost against his face by a hand of steel.

"So you know that Tolbert did not rejoin his child last night?" continued Captain Claude.

"I will not ask how you obtained the information."

The convict threw a quick glance at the sorceress.

"Don't you think you'd better go back to Paris, or elsewhere?"

"Maybe you'd like to get rid of me," answered Valjen, showing his teeth.

"I don't see why I should," smiled the detective. "You're not in my way."

Jean took in a breath of relief. Was it true that the Broadway spotter did not want to catch him?

"I do not want to see you. My business here is with Medusa," resumed Claude, and the six shooter which until then had been grinning at the convict, dropped at the speaker's side.

Thus dismissed, Jean Valjen slunk away, but with his eyes still fastened on the cool head of the secret police.

"Some other time, Captain Claude," he hissed under his breath. "You may be deceiving me now, but, whether you are or not, you will probably feel the teeth of the Rat before the game is played through."

Then he passed down the corridor and vanished.

"You know Jean?" asked Captain Coldgrip, turning upon Mother Medusa who was looking at the door beyond which the convict had just disappeared.

The woman started.

"Yes," she answered. "That is, he has found the way to my house."

"He is from France?"

"He came from Paris some time ago."

"Not direct."

"Oh no," and the woman smiled.

"He came from New Caledonia?"

"I do not know."

Captain Claude leaned forward and touched the woman's arm.

"Come," he said. "I know that you are not unfamiliar with Jean's past history. You know he was sent for life to the penal settlements. He came to New York—how long ago?"

"A year or more."

Medusa lowered her voice as she answered.

"He had a friend here?"

"Perhaps more than one."

"What ever became of his wife—the woman who was sent to La Petite Roquette?"

Medusa did not speak in reply.

"You do not want to tell me, I see," laughed the inquisitor.

"Maybe I do not know."

Captain Claude shook his head.

"The person who knew one of the pair in France, knew both," she said.

"In France?"

"In France."

"Captain Claude—"

"Don't deny, Medusa," interrupted the detective. "Once in Paris in the Rue de Capuchines dwelt a woman who had a name which was known beyond her door-sill. She is not there now. Dare I assert that she is not in New York?"

The sorceress who had been watching the detective like a hawk recoiled with a cry.

"What are you going to do about it?" she exclaimed, her eyes flashing suddenly.

"Nothing, Medusa. I was just refreshing your memory. Now, do you tell me that you know nothing about Madam Valjen's career after her mysterious escape from the prison? Her husband is here in New York. What became of her?"

Mother Medusa closed her lips with secret resolution, and made no answer.

"Keep your secret," Captain Claude went on. "If I discover it, you cannot be called treacherous."

"Do you want it?" demanded the sorceress, leaning forward. "Do you really want to know what became of Florette Valjen?"

"You have heard what I said."

The next moment the white hand of the woman caught the detective's wrist, and he was led back into the mystic room.

"I am a woman of mystery and secrets," she continued. "The present whereabouts of Florette I cannot disclose. She did escape from La Petite Roquette, but Paris did not hold her long. There! I have told you enough, Captain Claude. Let me add that Florette is as powerful now as she was in the days of her glory. You don't want to cross her path in the role of hunter and avenger. The sting of the French cobra is still death."

She dropped the wrist and started back.

"A thousand thanks," was the response. "You are very clever, Mother Medusa. Do not fear that Captain Claude, as you call him, is not able to take care of himself. Now, let us get back to business. Tolbert left your house after consulting you?"

"Yes."

"And you know not what afterward became of him?"

"I know not."

"The magic mirror could not trace him?"

"No."

"Then I will see what I can do," was the decision, and the detective walked to the door.

Medusa seemed anxious to get rid of her visitor, and the reply she made was worded deftly for that purpose.

Five minutes later the figure of the Broadway spotter left the house and moved away.

"You let him go, too, eh?" exclaimed Jean Valjen, as he appeared suddenly to Medusa in the chamber, almost before the detective had reached the sidewalk.

"Yes. What of it?" and the sorceress fixed her eyes on the convict.

"I thought you'd serve him the trick you served the other one last night."

"What other one?"

"Tolbert."

"I did not touch that man," cried Medusa. "More than once you have intimated that I know what became of him. I do not! The mystery which surrounds his disappearance is impenetrable to me."

Jean Valjen seemed to draw back a step.

"Is that true?" he asked, astonished.

"As true as Gospel."

"Then, in the name of wonder, what did become of the nabob from Pittsburg?"

"You will have to ask some one else," was the answer.

"It is a mystery that puzzles me," Jean went on. "He fell into bad hands after he left here."

"I am not responsible for that."

"No, of course not; but satisfy the police if you can!"

"Captain Coldgrip is satisfied."

"To Halifax with the Broadway ferret!" grated the ex-convict. "If he had not come out of the room when he did, I'd have clipped his muzzle. He knows me, don't you see? He is aware of the fact that I made my escape from the colony."

"The handbills they got out gave the world that news," Medusa interpolated.

"But Tolbert's eyes have been more dangerous than the posters. I am going to get even with this American hound before he can strike. If he never comes back to consult you, Medusa; if he suddenly disappears like Tolbert has done, you will not rush to Mulberry street with a fund of information. Eh?"

"I say you had better not," was the admonishing response.

"I know what is needed, and the Parisian Rat has not lost his cunning since coming to America. I heard of this Captain Claude before I left Paris in the Tempest, bound for the tropics. I allow no man to interfere with my game. I want no human sleuths on my trail when I am after a bonanza big enough to turn a cool man's head," and Jean slipped away and vanished.

"Somebody must know that somebody suspects," murmured the sorceress when the convict had gone. "I think I can find her at this hour, and the sooner the better."

Not long afterward the witch was on the street, but so well disguised that the shrewdest tracker would not have recognized her.

She took a cab at a certain corner and was driven rapidly up-town.

All at once the vehicle met another going in an opposite direction, and a light exclamation burst from the woman's lips.

"I find her out like myself," she exclaimed, and then she spoke to the man on the box.

"Turn and follow the carriage with the gray horses," was her command. "Don't lose sight of it for a moment. When it stops and lets its passenger out, stop also."

The next moment Medusa's cab was turned and the driver was following the vehicle just designated.

The chase was not of long duration, for shortly after the witch's discovery the gray team was guided to the sidewalk and the carriage door opened.

A lady in rich black dress alighted.

"It is she!" exclaimed the sorceress. "If she goes up-stairs I will meet her in the best place possible. Ah! this is better fortune than I make for most people."

The first carriage had stopped in front of a large building on middle Broadway, and the person who left it crossed the pavement to an open hallway.

Medusa did not lose sight of her for a moment.

"You're a little early, which suits me exactly!" thought the sorceress, and as the one in black disappeared she left her cab and hurried to the hall.

Already the woman followed so zealously by Medusa had reached the top of a flight of steps and entered a well-carpeted office whose door bore the sign of a firm of lawyers.

A boy seemed to have charge of the place at the time.

As the caller threw back the light vail which covered her face, she displayed the fair features of Dora Van Gordon.

"Mr. Sharpbill is not in," said the office boy in response to Dora's inquisitive look.

"When will he be here?"

"In ten minutes."

The millionaire's widow settled back into the arm-chair to wait while the young *attache* of the office continued to use the dusting brush with vigor.

All at once a footstep sounded at the door, and Medusa entered the room.

The eyes of the two women met in an undisputed glance of recognition.

The sorceress stepped quickly forward, and her hand found Dora's wrist as she bent over her till her lips almost touched the widow's ear.

"Beware!" she whispered. "He has discovered Jean, and he believes that you are not a thousand miles away."

Dora's eyes seemed to blaze.

"He—who?" she asked.

"The trail-dog of Broadway."

The kidded hands of Dora closed, and she said something Medusa did not catch.

CHAPTER XII.

A COOL SPY.

DURING the hours which intervened between the scenes at Mother Medusa's and nightfall the Broadway detective saw nothing of Sunshine Sam.

The reader will remember that the sun lizard had promised to pass beyond the threshold of the old-fashioned house, and to use his eyes and ears to advantage while inside.

The casual observer, noticing Sam basking in the sun of a sultry day, would never have taken him for a person of coolness and cunning; but Captain Coldgrip knew his man when he picked him up on one of his familiar posts.

The house inhabited by Ladroni, the old padrone of unenviable reputation, joined to another very much like it.

The structures were old enough to be noticeable by their peculiar architecture, and were sometimes called the "twin cherubs."

Very few people, even in the immediate neighborhood, knew that Ladroni had ventured back to his old stamping-ground, and those who knew it did not seem to care.

The finding of the two little skeletons in the cellar had passed beyond the memory of the many and was forgotten.

It was near eight o'clock on the night destined to witness the most thrilling adventure of Sunshine Sam's life, when a man approached the houses cautiously and halted at the steps of the one next to Ladroni's.

This person had a good figure and his face was covered with a somewhat bushy brown beard, which was a shade lighter than his hair.

Night had gathered over the city and the trees in front of the houses threw a dark shadow against the walls.

For several minutes the man remained at the steps, then he went up to the door, and rapped lightly near the bottom.

A moment later the portal was partly opened and the man slipped in like a fish breaking through a rent in a seine.

"Hello! is it you?" exclaimed a voice, and the speaker, a very thin, sallow-looking man of uncertain age, drew back and stared at his visitor.

"It's nobody else; but did you readily recognize me?" was the reply, with an accompanying grin. "Do I look like myself in this lay-out?"

"Not very much, Sam; but, still, I think I can see you in that garb."

The man who had been admitted to the house was Sunshine Sam.

He seemed surprised that his change of toilet had not proved entirely effectual, but he did not refer to it.

"Look here, Ballard. I'm to do a little dangerous work to-night," he suddenly resumed. "I have not come to keep you company long. I am to get into the other house."

"Into Ladroni's?" cried the thin man, in amazement.

Sam nodded.

"I guess you don't want to try that," continued Ballard. "The old fellow has eyes like a ferret."

"And talons like a hawk, eh?" grinned Sam.

"Yes."

"Well, claws or no claws, I must get under his roof. Come, Ballard; you told me once about the old door in the wall—the rat-hole, you called it. Now is the time for it to be put to good use."

"What are you expected to discover in the other house?" asked Sam's companion, curiously.

"I don't know."

"By Jove! you're off, Sunshine!"

"Not by a mile, at least," laughed the sun lizard. "It is past eight now, a few minutes. Let me get at the rat-hole."

Finding that the detective's spy was not to be balked, Ballard led the way to a room, one of whose walls joined the padrone's house.

"You are bound to try it?" he asked, turning upon Sam.

"I am."

Without another word, the sallow man stopped and crouched at the foot of the wall.

"Here's the rat-hole. Heaven knows what it was made for," he suddenly said, looking up into Sam's face.

Sunshine Sam joined him on the floor.

Ballard had disclosed the existence of a secret door, barely large enough to admit of the passage of a human body.

"It'll be a tight fit, Sunshine," he continued.

"I'm afraid so," was the reply.

Beyond the hole all was dark.

"It is the big room, you know; but you've been through the padrone's trap, and I need not tell you about it."

"I guess I know the house. Good-bye, Ballard. Here goes for rain or shine, thick or thin!"

The following moment Sunshine Sam was working his way through the singular door.

Ballard watched him with evident curiosity and fear.

The "fit" was, indeed, a close one, but the sun lizard of New York persevered until he had squeezed his body through, when Ballard drew a breath of relief.

"Shut the door," came in whispers through the opening, and the command was obeyed and Sam left to his fate.

We shall follow the ferret's man.

Sunshine Sam found himself in a darkened chamber of uncertain dimensions.

He crossed it cautiously, and found a door with no great search.

"Now for the uncertainties," he murmured, and then turning the knob without noise, he opened the portals with caution.

Beyond the door lay a hall, and across it another door, toward which the sun lizard advanced. As Sam had told the city sleuth, the present was not his first visit to Ladroni's. He carried in his mind an exact diagram of the house, knew every room and every door.

He might well have believed that he was the only tenant of the house at the time, for not a sound came to his ears. Yet Sam knew that somebody was not far away.

Once safely across the hall, he opened the door and entered a small apartment, dark like the first one he had entered.

Suddenly a sound struck his ear.

Sam was a statue in an instant.

A door had opened and shut, and there were footsteps in the hall near the room.

The following second the door of the apartment that held him opened.

"We want to make it impressive," said a man's voice. "Carroll won't be here, at least he said he would not. The queen came awhile ago, and we are a minute late."

Sunshine Sam hugged the somber wall at his back, and saw two figures cross the room and disappear through a door at the further end.

An exciting thought flashed across the spy's mind.

"Carroll isn't coming to-night," he mentally exclaimed. "The initiation which the captain wants me to witness is about to take place. By Jove! I've got an idea. It's feasible, but by Jove! it's dangerous!"

A few catlike steps carried the cool fellow to the door that had shut on the two men.

He opened it.

"Steps to the hall of mystery! just as I thought!" he exclaimed, looking down the short flight of steps over which fell the light of an unseen jet.

"The solitary hood on the peg is Carroll's," said a voice which came up to Sam with startling distinctness. "I wish he could come; but we will get along without him."

Then the listening man saw a shadow fall across the lowest step, and the slight noise of a closing door was heard.

Down the stair went the Broadway spotter's spy, and in a moment he found himself in a little ante-room walled with stone, and lighted by a single gas jet which projected from one of the cracks.

The small apartment was almost bare of furniture of every description.

On one of a dozen pegs fastened to a heavy board attached to the wall hung an object much like a sheriff's black cap.

It was solitary and alone, and Sam's eyes fairly glistened when they saw it.

"Carroll will be here for all," he ejaculated, reaching up and taking down the dark hood, which he speedily adjusted to his face.

Sunshine Sam was constantly getting into deeper water.

"Now for it, Sunshine. Don't forget Captain Claude's last injunction. If discovered, no betrayal of the ferret captain!"

These words were heard by no one for they were uttered inaudibly by the sun lizard, and while his hand rested on the latch of a door which opened upon—he knew not what.

All at once the spy opened the portal and advanced.

Retreat was impossible now; he had gone too far!

Sunshine Sam found himself facing the chamber of the Black Hoods.

He saw the room in its entirety, for the door he had opened was at one end. He noticed the chairs ranged in the form of a crescent and facing him, and at first glance he saw that one, and only one, was empty.

There were six chairs on either side of the half-circle, and in the center was one slightly raised above its neighbors.

With firm steps and unflinching resolution, Sunshine Sam walked to the vacant chair and occupied it.

Not a word was spoken. The Black Hoods sat like covered mummies in the dim light.

From the center of the ceiling hung the sword which we have seen there on a former occasion.

Resting in mid-air, as it seemed, it lent an air of mystery to the scene.

The sun lizard had taken one of the boldest steps of his life. In the space of a moment, as it were, he weighed the peril and his chances before opening the door.

"A fellow in my fix can't be inquisitive,"

thought Sam. "The queen is in her place, but in Jupiter's name, who is queen here?"

The person on the elevated chair was a female, but her black hood hid her face as those about her hid those of her companions.

Suddenly the deep silence which had followed Sam's entrance was broken.

"Bring in the new brother," said a voice that quivered the hood of the queen while the words were being spoken.

Two men left their chairs at the ends of the crescent, and advanced toward one of the walls.

Halting there, they opened a door and one leaned forward.

The next minute they were joined by a young man who came forth like a culprit from his cell, and the hoods stepped to his sides.

"That is the new brother, is it?" inwardly cried the ferret's spy. "I now begin to see why Captain Claude wanted me to come here. The young man yonder is the fellow I watched the other night, or till he was joined by the convict Jean Valjen!"

The trio were already advancing toward the middle of the room, and when directly in front of the Queen of the Hoods, a voice was heard:

"Let the light fall on the heart of the man who seeks the secrets of the Cobra Circle!"

The next instant the two men turned upon the candidate and in the twinkling of an eye, as it seemed, he was stripped to the waist, and stood erect, his white skin glistening in the gaslight.

It was a startling picture, and the thunderstruck spy wondered what was to follow next.

CHAPTER XIII.

BY THE SKIN OF HIS TEETH.

FOR a few moments Manuel was permitted to stand alone in the presence of the Black Hoods. Every eye was fixed upon him, and Sunshine Sam could not help admiring his perfect figure and clear complexion.

There was not a tremor of fear about the young man.

He waited composedly for the next move.

Suddenly, at the lifting of the hooded queen's right hand, the suspended sword shot downward like an arrow, and grazing Manuel's breast, quivered in the floor at his feet.

The detective's spy could not repress a start, but it was so slight that he was not betrayed.

Jean Valjen's pard had secured admission to the Cobra Circle of the Black Hoods, by what means it is not for us to detail, but at the suggestion of his convict master, and for a secret purpose of his own.

The sword at his feet had not fallen by accident, and the crimsoning track it had left on his bosom meant more than a mere scratch.

"The mark of the secret circle is on the flesh of the candidate," again spoke the Queen of the Order. "He will carry to his grave the scars of the sword which falls with vengeance on the head of the traitor. Let the oath be now administered, and the brother clothed again and invested with the black hood."

The succeeding moment the floor in front of Manuel parted and a black coffin rose slowly into view.

As it came up it was seen to be resting on a bier of iron, and when it stopped, the hand of the candidate could have touched it without great effort.

Manuel's wrist was now taken by one of his conductors, and he was led forward, and his right hand placed on the coffin-lid.

"Over the bones of the last traitor to the Black Hoods let the candidate for admission take the solemn oath of eternal fealty," continued Queen Dora.

Manuel was then sworn, repeating after one of the Hoods an oath so terrible that Sunshine Sam wondered how a human mind had devised it.

It was an oath which bound the candidate for life to the Order he had entered, and one whose violation would consign him to a horrible death at the hands of the secret brotherhood.

Manuel went through it without a quaver, and with one hand on the black lid of the coffin and the other above his head.

As the last word died away the coffin opened as if by magic, and the solemn voice of the hooded queen said:

"Look!"

Instinctively the eyes of Manuel looked into the gaping place, and saw the shriveled and blackened remains of a human being, like a mummy in its sarcophagus.

"The traitor looks at the new brother; the brother contemplates the traitor. Woe to the man who thinks of treachery! Death to the brother who enters the Cobra Circle for mercenary purposes!"

Then the coffin closed, the floor opened again, and, still resting on the iron bier, it sunk out of sight.

"I guess that's all, and Heaven knows it's enough?" muttered Sunshine Sam. "I've heard o' such things as these, but bless me, if I thought they could exist in New York. I hope the Order of the Black Hoods will adjourn and let me out o' the trap. I'm not at home here, and, then, Carroll, whose hood I've got, might put in an appearance. If he does, the jig'll be up with

Sunshine Sam, and Mammy Mox will look a long while for her baby."

In accordance with Sam's desires, the conclave showed signs of dissolution almost immediately after the ceremony of the oath.

Manuel had been given his clothes, and his face, like those by which he was surrounded, was concealed by a black hood.

When at last a rap announced the closing of the session, the members left their chairs and gathered about Manuel for congratulation.

Sunshine Sam took but little part in these proceedings. He did not want to trust his voice among the Hoods, and his congratulation consisted in merely touching Manuel's hand.

"Let me get out of here," he murmured. "The air seems thick, and they're looking at me more than I like."

He moved toward the door leading to the ante-chamber, and reached it with a gasp of relief.

The next moment he was in the stone-walled apartment, and the steps were before him.

All at once a figure appeared in the light of the gas-jet, and Sunshine Sam was confronted by a man who evidently had just arrived.

A thought flashed across his brain.

It was Carroll, the man he had personated at the mystic ceremonies just concluded!

"Am I late, brother?" asked the new-comer, catching sight of Sam.

"A little late," answered the detective's spy, as he stepped aside.

The man reached the floor and looked up at the vacant pegs intended for the somber hoods.

"My hood?" he said, turning suddenly toward Sam, but he spoke to air, for the sun lizard, hood and all, had vanished!

"I haven't got a second to lose!" ejaculated Sam, reaching the door at the top of the steps.

It was true, he had no time to fool away.

Already a thought of treachery had flashed through Carroll's brain, for the late comer to the conclave was Carroll.

He had turned to the door leading into the secret lodge-room, but ere he touched the latch, the portal was dashed open and two hoods appeared.

"Carroll!" cried one as both stopped astonished. "Where is the spy?"

A sudden cry broke from Carroll's lips.

"My God! I even talked with him!" he exclaimed. "A spy was he? Why, he came from the lodge!"

"So he did. He impersonated you, filled your place—"

"Death to the scoundrel! He can't escape us for the house is locked with the secret bolts!"

There was a dash by three men toward the stair. They went up together in one mad bound, and the next instant were in the room above!

Meanwhile what had become of Sunshine Sam?

"Am I in a death-trap?" the spotter's spy exclaimed as he crossed the room and reached the hall. "I'll have the Black Hoods at my heels in the drop of an eyelash. Great Cæsar! I don't want another mission like this one!"

His first thought was of the double front door, and an agile bound carried him to it.

But the first trial proved it to be locked, and he turned to the room into which opened the "rat-hole" that had admitted him to the house.

Fortunately for Sam the doors in Ladroni's old trap opened and shut without noise.

The one which opened into the big room was thus accommodating, and Sunshine Sam found himself within a few feet of the avenue of escape.

But all at once his ears were saluted by certain sounds which told him that the spy-hunters of Gotham were on his track.

He bounded to the wall, stooped, and struck the secret door three times in rapid succession.

The fraction of a second might save or destroy.

Ballard had promised to wait at the "rat-hole" for the purpose of guarding it, and to be ready to help the spy, though, in case of emergency.

Was he at his post?

Sunshine Sam held his breath while he waited for a response to his signal.

In heaven's name, where was Ballard?

"I saw no spy!" suddenly exclaimed a voice which Sam recognized. "Holy Virgin! gentlemen—"

"No, you never see anything you don't want to," was the response.

"Choke the truth out of him! Show the boy-killer that we don't put up with any foolishness!"

"Sacriste! mercy! mercy!" wailed the voice of the old padrone who was confronted in the hallway by half a dozen men with eyes flashing like the orbs of a tiger.

"Better you than me, Ladroni!" murmured Sam. "They'd do me up without ceremony, were I out there."

It was evident from the sounds that the padrone had fallen into the hands of the brethren of the secret Order.

"Make him show us the trail of the spy!" said a voice. "Hold him up in the light, and let us see his face. I always thought the old Italian was playing double. Ah! here is the queen!"

If Sam could have looked into the hall at that moment, he would have seen a woman join the men grouped about the white-faced padrone at the foot of a stair.

"Ladroni is loyal," said Dora, laying her hand on the man who held the padrone in a grip of steel which had caused him to cry out with pain.

"He must have seen the spy," was the answer as the man looked into the eyes which shone brilliantly behind the mask the woman still wore.

"No! no—mercy! I saw nothing!" gasped the old wretch.

"Search the house," continued Dora. "It is locked with the secret bolts. The spy cannot get out. He is held like a rat in the trap. To work! We want the life of the night fox!"

Ladroni was released and the men sprung back.

"Don't miss a room—not a crevice, either!" the woman went on. "Yon room first," and her hand designated the door which stood between her and the Broadway shadow's spy.

At this important movement, and not until now, the response to Sunshine Sam's signal came. There was a slight noise at his feet.

The sun lizard crouched in eager expectation.

"For God's sake, open the door!" he cried, with his lips against the wall.

It was opened.

A second later, with the desperation of a hunted criminal, Sam pushed himself into the hole.

"Pull, Ballard!" he exclaimed, and instantly a pair of hands clutched him at the shoulders.

Quick work was necessary for Sunshine Sam's salvation, and quick work was done.

As the door leading into the hall was opened, the "rat-hole" closed, and Captain Coldgrip's spy was for the moment safe.

"By the skin of my teeth!" cried Sam, with a hearty grin overspreading his face as the man Ballard looked at him in astonishment. "I don't want another trip like that."

"What did you see?"

"Something more terrible than anything you've ever dreamed of, Ballard. Don't ask me. Does Ladroni know of the existence of the 'rat-hole'?"

"I think not."

"The Hoods may find it, though."

"Who are the Hoods?"

"Never mind. I won't compromise you by remaining here. Good-night, Ballard. A still tongue is a mighty good member under certain circumstances."

The next minute, greatly to his relief, Sunshine Sam was on the street again, the only spy who had ever penetrated to the Cobra Circle.

But he was not yet safe.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SUDDEN CLEW.

"WELL, did you get through?"

"Give me a chance to get my breath. I have walked fast since leaving the car."

And the last speaker, a young man who had just entered a room where a companion had been waiting for him, dropped into a chair with an audible expression of satisfaction.

"Yes, I got through, but I don't want another scene like it," he exclaimed.

"Was the initiation so terrible?"

"Not so startling. I expected to be received with mystic rites, and I was, to some extent."

"Was the Queen of the Order present?"

"She was."

"Well?"

"She is Florette, as you call her. There can be no mistake."

"Ah! you saw her face?"

"No, Captain Jean, I did not get so much as a glimpse of it. The black hoods hid the faces of all. But I recognized Florette's voice. She is the Queen of the Black Hoods."

"As she was the Queen of the Mystic Hands in Paris!" broke forth Jean Valjen. "What a cool, wonderful woman she is! Never at rest unless she has a hand in something dark and devilish. You can now take the cards I have selected for the play. The brethren of the Black Hoods have signs by which they recognize one another, I presume?"

"Yes; I know them all. I was privately instructed after the hunt for the spy ended."

"The spy?" cried the convict, with a sudden start. "What spy do you mean, Manuel?"

A smile came into existence and played with the young man's lips.

"We had a black sheep in the flock to-night," he said. "A spy witnessed the ceremony."

"No!"

"It is time."

"You finished him of course?" exclaimed Jean.

"On the contrary, he got away."

"By Jove! this is bad!"

"Not so bad after all. Some of the brotherhood profess to know him."

"Oh, if they are sure of him, it will do, provided they strike soon. Was the spy the Broadway ferret who wants to chase us off?"

"I think not."

"What do they say?"

Manuel leaned toward Jean and lowered his voice.

"It was the sleuth's hired hound," he whispered. "I heard one of the Hoods say that Captain Coldgrip would soon have to look for another tool."

"Then the spy was the man called Sunshine Sam!" exclaimed Jean Valjen.

Manuel nodded.

"It ought not to take a dozen men long to entrap that fellow," cried Jean in a voice expressive of contempt. "I could do it myself within forth-eight hours."

"Do it!" replied Manuel. "Nothing would suit me better. Trap Captain Coldgrip's man and let me have the credit. I want to signalize my entrance into the Circle with an act that will fix me with the gang. And what would do it better than the capture of the spy who got away by the skin of his teeth to-night?"

"It is a splendid scheme!" exclaimed the convict. "It will fix you solid with Florette, and it shall be done. You took the oath in full?"

"There was no way getting around it," answered the youth with a smile.

"It brings death to the violator, eh?"

"Death!"

"Did they mark you in any manner?"

Manuel opened his bosom and exposed to Jean's gaze the still crimson mark made by the sword in its descent from the ceiling.

"That's a mere scratch!" laughed Jean.

"Scratch or not, it is there for life," was the reply.

"Well, all that you have passed through is not going to turn you aside?" he asked as his eyes filled with an eager look.

"No," and Manuel's lips met firmly. "I know nothing but the success of our great scheme, Captain Jean. We cannot fail. The Queen of the Black Hoods has been discovered in her natural role, and we have but to put out our hands for a solid half million. After that a life of ease as nabobs of quality, ha, ha, ha!"

The eyes of Jean Valjen got a glitter as Manuel laughed.

"By Jupiter! it was a brave feat! I never heard of one braver!" he suddenly exclaimed. "You dared recognition and death, and came out winner. Manuel, you shall have the lion's share!"

There was no answer.

Manuel the young initiate took a couple cigars from a pocket, tossed one across the table to Jean, and lit the other himself.

"The Broadway ferret is completely at fault," suddenly said the convict through the smoke that sought the ceiling. "He can't find a trace of Tolbert, the Pittsburgher."

"How do you know?" asked Manuel.

"I dropped into the hotel this evening. There is a good deal of excitement over the mysterious disappearance. The clerk told a reporter in my hearing that the detectives thus far have been utterly unable to find a clew."

"What is the theory?"

"A decoy and a sand-bag," answered Jean with a smile.

"The daughter, Laura, a deuced pretty girl as I have told you, will leave for home tomorrow if no results are obtained. Jericho! it was a lucky accident. The man was actually on my track, he had posted the Broadway sleuth. But now some party or parties unknown step in and relieve me of a good deal of anxiety. Mother Medusa did not do it, though I thought so once. Tolbert left her house alive and well. He was struck for money by the thugs of Gotham. That is my theory," and Jean filled his mouth with smoke and sent half a dozen white rings above his head.

This meeting and conversation occurred about an hour after the conclusion of Manuel's initiation in the secret cellar of the padrone's house.

The youth who had risked so much in becoming a brother of the Black Hoods, had rejoined Jean by a roundabout path.

He was confident that he had eluded the eyes of his fellow Hoods, and more than once had congratulated himself on this result.

While he enjoyed his cigar in the secluded Brooklyn house, for he had put the river between the mystic lodge-room and himself, the man who was believed by many people never to sleep was on the trail which was not all the time in the gas-light.

Across the river shimmering with a thousand lights a figure moved down one of the narrowest and darkest streets of New York.

It had a quick and almost noiseless tread and when it reached the mouth of a certain alley it disappeared in the twinkling of an eye.

Those familiar with the many disguises which Captain Coldgrip could assume, and no one man knew them all, would not have recognized him as the night fox in the dark neighborhood.

A few feet from the sidewalk he turned to the right and found a door just as if he knew it was there.

A knock brought a step to the portal, it opened, and he entered.

"Ho! what is it?" exclaimed the Gypsy-like looking woman who had admitted him.

She held a dirty lamp in her hand, and appeared frightened in the presence of the man before her.

"What do I want?" echoed the detective.

"You sent for me!"

The woman drew back.

"I never did," she said, with a shake of the head. "May I never see my mother again, if I've ever had any dealings with the likes o' you!"

The detective smiled.

"You don't seem to know me," he went on, leaning forward while he dropped his voice.

"I am Captain Coldgrip."

"You?" cried the woman. "Then I did send for you—a letter by the boy. Could you read it, captain?"

"Oh, yes."

The next minute the city sleuth was treading a narrow hall at the woman's heels, and in a little while she opened a door and ushered him into a poor room with a badly smoked ceiling.

"I don't know what it means," she resumed, her voice an alarmed whisper now and her eyes full of fear. "I did not know who else to send for, for I don't know all the men-catchers of New York. I've heard Jess, the boy, say, that he knows Captain Coldgrip and that's why he came to find you. It's in the next house, sir."

"What is?"

"The man who is tied to a bed."

"A crazy man?" ejaculated the captain.

"I—I don't know. He wasn't there two days ago. He was brought in at night by two men. I was up with Jess when they came in, sir. In the house on our right, and the room next to our place."

Captain Coldgrip was silent for a moment.

"Is this why I've been sent for, my good woman?" he asked.

"Yes."

"A policeman would have done just as well."

"I don't like the cops!" was the quick retort.

"Besides, some o' them don't care much what the hawks o' the city do after sundown. You don't want to help the man, sir? You don't care about sending him back to his daughter?"

"His daughter, did you say?"

"I said that very thing. Jess, who has an ear like a fox, has been listening and watching ever since the man became our next door neighbor. He's heard him talk about his daughter who was left at one o' the big hotels—"

"Where's the boy?"

"He's out. Sometimes he doesn't come in till he gets ready and he never gets ready till late," was the answer.

A thrill had passed over Captain Claude's frame.

Had he unexpectedly found Tolbert's trail?

"I will investigate the affair, madam," he said.

"But don't mix me up in it," was the reply, and the brown skeleton-like hand fastened on the spotter's arm. "I don't want to know anything about what the hawks of New York do. I've had my share—more than my share. But I couldn't keep quiet after what Jess told me."

"You haven't always been Mrs. Morley, the name you signed to the note?" said Coldgrip studying her face.

"I have not. That is why I don't want to be mixed up in this matter. You ought to remember me, but as you've forgotten, I won't enlighten you."

Captain Coldgrip picked up the light and held it close to the woman's face.

For a moment she stood the scrutiny of the keen eyes, and then made a mask of her hands.

"Who ever you are, I don't intend to molest you," the detective exclaimed. "I am not going to turn you over to the law, no matter what you have done."

"Thanks! I've been living in the shadow of prison doors ever since Joel Van Gordon had me hunted like a murderer."

"I know you now! You are the maid Nina!" cried the detective.

"I am the woman who was accused of taking Mrs. Van Gordon's diamond pin a year after her marriage."

"And you were guilty?"

"Yes," smiled the woman grimly. "It wouldn't have done for her to have caught me. I should say not! That pin could talk."

"What could it have said?"

"I dare not tell you," was the answer.

CHAPTER XV.

FOLLOWING THE SCENT.

"HERE is a chance for light!" mentally decided the sleuth.

"Unexpected fortune has thrown this woman in my way."

Then he put the lamp down and continued aloud:

"You need not be afraid to unseal your lips, Nina. The man who hunted you with such vindictiveness at the command of his wife will not prosecute you now."

"You don't know him," cried Nina.

"I did know him; but he is dead."

The woman uttered a startling cry.

"Dead? Joel Van Gordon dead?"

"Yes."

A strange pallor overspread Nina's face.

"This is news to me. But I hear nothing from the outside only what Jess fetches in," she said with a faint smile. "So Dora outlived the man

she caught as the spider catches the fly? I thought she would. What killed him, Captain?"

"Heart disease, the doctors say."

Captain Coldgrip watched the woman very closely while he spoke. He thought he saw a flash of derision in her eyes, but was not certain.

"Now, won't you go back to the diamond pin?" he went on. "A long time has elapsed since the—the affair, and it is quite forgotten."

"Not by Dora Van Gordon—not by the French witch who played for the old man's millions."

"The French witch?" echoed the sleuth.

"Yes. Ah! some people have a dual existence. I did not live nearly a year in the Van Gordon mansion for nothing. I had eyes and ears then as I have now. And hands, too, as the police thought in those days."

"What did you do with the pin? It was too well known for you to sell."

"Right you are, Captain Claude. I dared not offer it for sale. Why, I would have been arrested on sight, and probably by your hands. The pin was too much for me, but when I had taken it, knowing Joel Van Gordon as I did, I could not compromise."

"Then you have it yet?"

"Who says so?"

"Come, Nina. Play fair with me."

"And give the pin up to have it restored to the woman who would have had me hanged only a short time ago? I've got too much love for Jess. I don't want to go up the river."

"You shall make no trip of the kind. Now that Van Gordon is dead, why refuse to let the diamond pin tell its own story?"

Nina broke out with a light laugh.

"Something makes you very eager, Captain Coldgrip," she exclaimed. "Are you certain that Dora's husband died from heart disease?"

She leaned toward the city sleuth, and her expression was one full of intense eagerness.

"No, I am not!" cried Captain Claude, clutching her wrist and pulling her forward. "The doctors don't know every thing, Nina. There is a weird mystery about Joel Van Gordon's death. He was found dead on the floor of his sleeping apartment."

"Who found him?—his wife?"

"No; one of the house servants."

"Where was Dora at the time?"

"In her own room."

"And Marian?"

"In hers."

"What kind of a trail have you had?" asked Nina.

"A mixed one," was the reply.

"Does Marian believe what the doctors said?"

"The girl is suspicious."

"Why should she not be?" ejaculated the missing maid. "Dora never liked a drop of her blood. She hated Marian as the wolf hates the faithful dog that guards his master's property. I wasn't long in the house before I discovered this. It was not difficult to discover it, either. Now I believe I will let the pin speak. I think the time has come for it, Captain Claude; but, as I have said, I am not to be dragged into the matter."

"Not without your consent, Nina," promised the detective.

The woman told Captain Claude to wait for her a few moments, and the next second she had disappeared.

"I see! The two trails are bound to run together," thought the city ferret during Nina's absence. "Dora Van Gordon knows something about the dark Order which Sunshine Sam was to watch to-night, and Manuel, Jean Valjen's young tool, is going to penetrate the Circle for a purpose against the millionaire's widow. The man who came to Dora a few hours before her husband's death was the Caledonia convict. I begin to see the link that unites them. Now if the stolen pin will give me a definite clew, I will be likely to startle New York within forty-eight hours."

By this time the footsteps of the returning woman were heard, and she came back with a look of triumph on her face.

Captain Coldgrip noticed that she locked the door behind her, and when she halted at the table beside which he stood, she opened one of her hands and disclosed a small ivory box.

"I have nearly starved, with this diamond-mine in the house," she began, with a smile. "I've often wondered what possessed me to take it; but I did, and that's all there is of it."

As she concluded, she opened the box and revealed on a bed of crimson plush a brilliant diamond pin, well known by description to every lapidary and detective in New York.

Captain Coldgrip's eyes seemed to glitter when they caught sight of it.

"You see, this pin is of French workmanship," continued Nina, lifting the jewel from the box. "It was in Dora's possession when she became the wife of Joel Van Gordon. The diamonds are set in what appears to be a piece of solid gold."

She turned the pin over as if to show Captain Claude that she spoke the truth.

"You may remember that in the published descriptions of the pin, no mention was made of

its secret," she went on. "I discovered it by the merest accident. See here!"

The next moment the bottom of the gold setting opened like a secret lid, and Nina's eyes sparkled as they looked up into Captain Claude's face.

"Isn't it wonderful?" she exclaimed.

"I have seen pins and rings nearly like it," answered the sleuth.

"That may be; but they never carried a secret like Dora's diamond pin," said Nina. "I found in this cavity a letter written on very thin paper. The characters, though small, are very plain. It was a letter written to Dora. I do not see why she never destroyed it. She may have kept it because she thought a great deal of the writer."

"Where is the letter, Nina?"

"Here, Captain Claude."

And the woman drew from the golden receptacle a bit of folded paper, and handed the same to the Broadway shadower.

"Help yourself to it," she continued. "It may not astonish you very much, but it may be one of the missing links. I don't know whether the letter came to Dora in the pin. She may have had the golden safe made for it."

Already Captain Coldgrip was unfolding the paper, which was very thin. It had been carefully folded at one time, and placed in the pin.

Nina watched him with intense curiosity while he worked with the find, and when he had finished, she pushed the lamp across the table toward his chair.

"Bravo!" she exclaimed. "Now read what it says."

The following moment the detective was doing so, while the woman drew back and looked closely at the curtained window on her right.

This is what Captain Coldgrip read:

"IN HADES, Oct. 12, 1870.

"MY WIFE, FLORETTE:—

"Another twenty-four hours of untold wretchedness have just ended. This is not New Caledonia, but the blazing heart of the arch-fiend's kingdom! I will not let the old hulk hold me long. I am the rat which some day will gnaw his way to freedom. Then let the administrators of French law look out. I think of you, my wife, a thousand times a day. I see you in the heart of the infamous prison, Roquette, which will not hold you long after my return. Your twenty years shall not be ten, nor five! The police dogs who smelled us out shall feel my teeth. That last victim was destined to give us trouble. Why did your fingers bungle the job?—But no! I will not accuse you. My love for you, Florette, devours me every day. Cheer up. This letter will reach you, for I know the hands to which it is to be consigned for delivery. Did they really brand you? If so, it was Captain Javert's suggestion. May Heaven spare the wretch till I get my liberty! Think of me. Florette. Don't forget that you are the wife of Jean Valjean, the life convict. You will live to know that your love for him was not lost. Adieu.

"Your husband till death.

JEAN."

Captain Coldgrip had some difficulty in reading the letter, for the characters were almost microscopic in size, but he got through it in a little while.

"This is a startling link," he murmured. "Who would have thought that I would find it here? Mother Medusa, with all her infernal magic, could not have put me on its track. Why did Dora preserve this letter? Did she love Jean Valjean with the intensity of his passion for her? Ah! my Queen of the Secret Circle, I have another proof that you came to Joel Van Gordon for a purpose deep, dark, and deadly! Marian has a right to hate you. But I have to prove what I suspicion and what Marian believes. Can I do it? Time will tell."

The detective looked up and caught Nina's eyes fastened upon him.

"What do you think?" asked the woman with a smile.

"It is something," was the reply.

"I should say it was. It tells you what you may have suspected—that Dora Van Gordon, when she captured the millionaire, was the wife of a life convict. It tells you that the woman was a criminal herself. I have more proof than that letter contains. Dora Van Gordon, or Florette, is branded."

"How do you know?"

"Never mind. I know it!" was the response. "Haven't I told you that while I was her maid, I had eyes and ears? I seldom shut both at once. I liked Marian and her father; but the French viper!—her beauty and her voice made my flesh creep! Take the letter. It is yours. Let me keep the pin. Or, must you have it also, Captain Claude?"

"Will you give it up when I ask for it?" asked the detective.

"I will."

The spotter put the letter away in a secret pocket, and a short time later bade Nina good-night.

"Don't forget the man next door," were the woman's last words.

"I'll remember him," smiled the sleuth, and the pair parted.

As Captain Claude stepped upon the sidewalk at the mouth of the alley, two figures came together a few feet away.

"Don't lose sight of him for a moment," whispered one. "The whole organization is in

danger—our queen among the rest. That man is the king of human ferrets—it is the sleepless Coldgrip!"

And the man who hurried off had two shadows at his heels.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE SUN LIZARD IN THE TOILS.

SUNSHINE SAM after his narrow escape from the fury of the Black Hoods did not repair immediately to the spot where he was to report to Captain Coldgrip.

If he had gone to the Broadway office he would not have found the detective in.

Two hours passed before Sam turned into Broadway.

He had passed the time in various places, and believing that he was unwatched, he at last darted into the familiar hallway, and bounded up the steps leading to Captain Claude's quarters.

He had an exciting adventure to relate.

Opening the door with a skeleton key which he carried, he walked into the dark and unoccupied room, and took a chair.

"Captain Claude'll drop in presently," murmured Sam. "He knows about when I'm likely to show up, and he'll be anxious to hear my story."

He shut but did not lock the door, and as he was not anxious to attract undue attention he failed to turn on the gas.

Snugly ensconced in the city sleuth's chair, the sun lizard proceeded to enjoy the rest he had earned by one of the coolest plays a man had ever made.

He thought of all he had just gone through, and fixed the starting-point of his forthcoming narrative firmly in his mind.

A cigar added much to Sam's enjoyment, and while the moments passed without bringing the detective, he puffed away to his satisfaction.

An hour flitted away. Captain Claude did not come.

Sunshine Sam finished the cigar and searched his pockets in vain for its mate.

After awhile a heavily breathing man filled the chair.

The detective's tool could doze in the dark as well as in the sun, and he had proved this by dropping asleep in the gloomy room.

Sunshine Sam slept on, and the great street beneath him grew still.

He did not miss the wagons, nor the rush and roar of traffic.

Neither did he hear the footsteps that came up the stair and died away at the door he had left unlocked.

Two men stood at the threshold and listened to the distinct breathings of the night spy on the inside.

Below, just within the hallway and against the wall, another man watched the street with the air of a trusty sentry.

Thus there were three of a kind.

Some little time elapsed when the door-knob was slowly turned and a slight and noiseless advance was made.

Sam slept on, unconscious of these proceedings. He was reposing on a powder magazine, and Captain Claude was likely never to hear his story.

The two men came into the room.

Just beyond the door they stopped and located Sam by his sonorous breathings.

Presently a little ball of light appeared in the room. It was the disk of a small dark lantern, and by and by the rays revealed the man in the chair.

If Sam had opened his eyes at that moment he might have seen the two men who leaned toward him, one holding the lantern and the other dangling at his side an object like a bag.

Sam had been hunted down despite his tortuous movements since quitting the padrone's den; there was no question about it.

Slowly the man with the dangling object approached the sleeper.

He had the tread of the cat in velvet soles, and his eyes were fixed on the face revealed by the rays of the bull's-eye.

All at once the hands of the man went up over his head, he next covered the space between Sam and himself, and the net, for net the strange object was, descended over the sun lizard's head.

It was the work of a second, and with the tightening of the snare Sam awoke to struggle against a mastering fate.

He would have gained his feet if the man with the lantern, anticipating such a move, had not forced him back into the chair.

Then the grip of the strangling hood under his chin grew tighter than ever, and in an instant Sam realized that he had fallen into dangerous hands.

"No foolishness. It means death," came through the suffocating cap. "You'll have a chance if you behave yourself. Don't throw everything away."

Sam became quiet.

During the next five minutes he was stood up, and had his hands fastened loosely but still firmly to his sides. The cap was not removed, but its closeness was relieved and he could easily get his breath.

One of the men went to Captain Coldgrip's private desk, and held the bull's-eye close to the lock.

A glance seemed to disappoint him, for he threw a look over his shoulder at his companion and shook his head.

The lock could not be picked.

"Let us go," said this fellow to his friend.

"We've caught enough for to-night."

The next moment the cap was jerked from Sunshine Sam's head, and he saw two well-built men in masks.

"Have the Hoods found me?" inwardly exclaimed Sam. "Maybe I was a fool for coming here, but it's too late to lament at this stage o' the game. I've got to take matters as they come on, and, from present appearances, they don't promise to be very pleasant."

When one of the men took Sam's arm, the other did the same, and he was conducted from the room and down the stairs to the person on guard in the hallway.

Not a word was spoken.

The sidewalk was struck, with the astonished Sam guarded by the three, and a moment later he was marched to a carriage that stood near.

One of the men opened the door, another sprung nimbly to the driver's seat, and the third pushed him inside.

"This would read like romance, but I'm hanged if it's very romantic to me," thought Sunshine Sam, as the door of the vehicle closed upon him with two of his enemies to keep him company.

After a breathing-spell which was very brief the horses started off, and the carriage was soon rattling over the street.

"I wonder if I'm going back to Ladroni's?" mentally cried the sun lizard. "These fellows haven't explained themselves. Perhaps they would not if they were asked to."

Sam allowed another minute to pass in silence.

"What does all this mean, gentlemen?" he asked, with a slight sarcastic accent on the last word.

"You ought to know," was the reply.

"Hang me, if I can think," said Sam.

"Then, you're the biggest fool in New York."

"I think I am. In fact, I know I am. Gentlemen, haven't you caught the wrong man?"

A laugh sounded in the darkness of the vehicle.

"We never catch the wrong man," was the answer that followed.

"I'm not the captain."

"Of course you're not Coldgrip."

"Then, what am I wanted for?"

"Exercise a little patience. You are no chump, Sunshine Sam. You haven't dozed in the sidewalk sun for years for nothing; but tonight you carried the joke a little too far," and the last words were repeated in a voice that had a significant meaning.

"A little too far, sun lizard and spy!" it said.

Sam replied to the speaker with silence, and the carriage turning suddenly into another street at that moment, gave a lurch which almost overturned it.

The ride promised to be an endless one.

Street after street was invaded by the carriage, and the frequent deviations now being made told Sam that he was in the narrowing quarter of the city where the thoroughfares were numerous.

"Is this ride never to end?" suddenly exclaimed Sam.

"It is ended now."

At that moment the horses trotted to the right and stood still.

A han'l was promptly at each of the spy's arms, and he was hustled out of the vehicle and across a narrow sidewalk before he got a chance to inspect the building which rose before him.

"Now for the tug of war," murmured Sunshine. "I guess I'll know in a little while whether I'm to adorn a coffin or grace a prison. Let these night hawks give me half a chance—let 'em show me a ray of hope, and I'll demonstrate that the sun lizard knows a thing or two."

A door had already closed behind the prisoner of the masks, and still held by the arms, he was conducted down a wide hall and into a room uncarpeted and with no furniture excepting a table and several chairs.

"Sit down!" commanded one of the men.

Sam obeyed.

A gas jet burned dimly overhead.

"We'll see you later, Samuel," continued the man who had spoken last. "If you get lonely there is enjoyment in yon drawer. Make yourself at home and don't try to get out like a restless bird. Don't, Samuel!"

The two masks withdrew quickly to the door, and as Sunshine Sam turned in his chair, it opened for them, and they were gone!

Captain Coldgrip's spy sat still for a few moments like a person in a state of stupefaction. The last adventures seemed in the nature of a dream. He could hardly believe that he had fallen into the clutches of enemies, yet the almost bare room and the cord which secured his arms told him that such was the case.

"What kind of a place is this?" suddenly

cried Sam, quitting the chair. "I've been in traps before, but maybe never in one like this."

He advanced to the window nearest the table and halted by it.

"Bars, eh?" he went on, surveying the half-inch irons that crossed and recrossed the window and formed a network seemingly strong enough to resist the powers of a giant.

"This place wasn't prepared for me. The irons have been in their places too long. This is an old prison, and the men who brought me hither knew exactly what they were doing."

He moved to the remaining windows, there were three in all, and found them similarly barred.

"It has been thus all my life," he observed, a grim smile playing the while with his lips. "I never have any trouble getting in, but I'm always bothered to get out."

Back he went to the table.

"They said I'd find enjoyment here," he went on, jerking open the solitary drawer it contained.

He found a lot of city newspapers, the freshest several days old, and not taking them out, he shut the drawer with a bang that nearly upset the table.

The following moment he was back in the chair, with his eyes fastened on the door, and waiting.

What more could be done?

Just half an hour after Sam's arrival at the barred room the door-bell of the Van Gordon mansion tinkled musically, and Dora unfolded the bit of paper which had been delivered to of city person, and read:

"The spy has been netted. The rest is easy!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A BOMBSHELL.

NEXT day the unexpected happened.

Duke Tolbert, the missing man, appeared at the hotel and startled everybody by his return.

Laurel sprung into his arms with a piercing cry of joy, and fainted in his embrace.

Tolbert was at once besieged by a thousand inquiries as to where he had been and what had kept him from his child; but to all he replied with a smile and a shake of the head.

It was apparent that the man had either been sworn to secrecy or did not want to disclose his doings, and he was left alone with Laurel.

"Don't question me, child," he said, to the overjoyed girl. "Let my lips be sealed, for the present at least."

"Something terrible has happened," cried Laurel, drawing back and looking at him with very little color in her face.

"Yes, something happened," and then he turned the conversation into another channel.

The papers got a hold of it, and the afternoon editions annoyed Tolbert so much that he determined to quit New York and return to Pittsburgh.

The following day he bought tickets, and put the river between him and the traps and mysteries of Gotham.

If Captain Coldgrip knew how Tolbert had managed to escape from the toils, he said nothing about it.

He appeared to be waiting for the return of somebody who did not come.

Sunshine Sam had not put in an appearance!

What had transpired? Had the sun lizard failed to escape from the padrone's house after effecting an entrance? Had he fallen a victim to the vengeance of the Order which was to have initiated Manuel, Jean Valjen's cool young partner?

For two days the city sleuth waited and looked for Sam.

There was a deepening mystery surrounding the sun lizard's absence.

"If they caught him," declared the detective more than once, "woe to every person who had a hand in it!"

No wind blew to Captain Claude an inkling of the scene which had taken place in his office.

He invaded Medusa's den of magic and mystery, but obtained no clew.

The sorceress could not put him on Sam's trail. Neither did she tell him that she had warned Dora Van Gordon to be on the lookout for the Broadway shadow.

"It beats me, turns me completely over," exclaimed Jean Valjen to Manuel in the Brooklyn rendezvous on the day of Tolbert's departure from New York.

"What does?" asked Manuel.

"Why, Sunshine Sam's disappearance. I promised to entrap him for you within forty-eight hours, but here I can't get a glimpse of him. I can find the master—I've seen him twice since your initiation—but Sam doesn't show up. Maybe the Hoods caught him?"

Manuel shook his head.

"You mean you know nothing about it?" queried Jean.

"That's what I mean. The spy may be in hiding."

"I think I would be if I had had his adventures. He doesn't want to show up on the street just now. You look elegant enough to catch the wariest beauty in Gotham, Manuel. Be careful that you don't catch the widow!"

Jean laughed as he finished the last sentence.

Manuel was putting the finishing touches to an elegant toilet in front of a dressing mirror, and the ex-convict had been watching him some time.

"You know what they say, boy," he went on. "The report is that the girl has a lover out West—the son of a former companion of her father's."

"Why doesn't he come and claim the prize?" demanded Manuel.

"He may be in no hurry."

"Well, let him put up with the consequences. Who is he, Captain Jean?"

"I don't know. A good many years ago Joel Van Gordon went West, to California, where he made his first big stake. They tell a story about his once being Sheriff of Hangtown. At any rate, he was a man of prominence out there. Report, as I have said, has it that Marian is engaged to a young man whose father and hers were once companions among the gold-diggings. The millionaire's death has revived talk about the betrothal. They say the young rancher is coming in."

"He'll have to come soon to get ahead of me," laughed Manuel. "I'm not very old in years, Captain Jean, but I know a trick or two in diplomacy, especially where there's a chance for a couple of fellows like us to feather our nest with a million."

"Right you are, Manuel. I'd pit you against the oldest and coolest head on the continent."

"Against the Broadway spotter, eh?"

"To Halifax with Coldgrip! He has lost his street ally, and seems to be entirely at sea. When I looked into his revolver at Medusa's, I thought he had me; but since then I don't take much stock in his cunning. There! you're rigged out, now. The sign of the Order will admit you to the Van Gordon Mansion?"

"It will take me into a hundred places," replied the young man. "Shall I ask Dora whether she got your letter?"

"The one which asked her for a check signed in blank? Heavens, no!" exclaimed the convict.

"You are joking, of course, Manuel."

The youth burst into a hearty laugh.

"I'm no fool, Jean," he answered. "Dora shall never suspect that a link unites us. We know what to do to gild our well-worn plumes. Now I shall leave you. Will you be here when I come back?"

"Perhaps not. If anything important occurs you will find a message behind the picture. Don't lose your head, my boy."

"I'll fetch it back on the shoulders that carry it at present," was the response, and a few seconds later Manuel, scrupulously dressed, left the house and walked away.

It was a warm afternoon, and he walked down the shaded street toward the bridge.

"I think the spy has fallen into the trap of the league," he murmured. "I may hear a report to this effect at the next meeting. I wish Jean could have snared him, for it would have helped me on with our queen. Never mind, though. Sunshine Sam's fate will help me. He saw me taken into the Cobra Circle, and if the Hoods have sealed his lips, Captain Coldgrip, whom I fear despite Jean's derision, will never know my connection with it."

Manuel crossed the bridge and was about to take a car up-town when his arm was touched.

He looked around, and saw a man at his side.

"To-night at nine," said the stranger. "Let no brother fail to stand masked under the suspended blade."

A strange thrill swept through Manuel's frame.

He had been addressed by a member of the mysterious brotherhood, and almost before he could respond with a nod the man was gone.

"To-night, eh?" repeated Manuel. "I begin to feel a little uneasy. What if Sunshine Sam has confessed that he knows me to be a friend of Jean Valjen whom Dora hates? Ho! what a fool I am; Sam knows nothing of this sort. I am too deep in the game to draw back now. I've played deep before."

Not long afterward the well-dressed young man mounted the steps of the Van Gordon mansion.

There was an air of determination about him, and he jerked the knocker with a good deal of eagerness.

He was admitted, and in a little while Dora appeared in the semi-darkened parlor.

Her dark eyes seemed to grow brilliant when they fell upon Manuel, and for several seconds she looked at him without speaking.

"I am glad to find you so punctual," began the Queen of the Black Hoods, in low but distinct tones. "How do you like the new life?"

"I am delighted," answered Manuel.

"You will like it better by and by. We have to keep clear of the sleuth-hounds who are always scenting friendships like ours. They are at fault all the time while we work," and Dora gave vent to a triumphant laugh.

"I want you to meet Miss Van Gordon," the woman went on. "She will be here presently for I have told her that a friend was coming."

Manuel thought of the report about the betrothal.

"I hear that she is soon to be married," he observed, catching Dora's eye at the moment.

Mrs. Van Gordon started.

"Who told you?" she asked.

"Rumor," replied Manuel, and then added with a smile: "But rumor seldom sends an arrow to the center."

"It will go wide of the mark this time," was Dora's response. "Miss Marian will never be the wife of the person with whom her name has been connected."

Manuel saw that Dora uttered her words with great firmness. Her lips closed tightly behind them, and her eyes seemed to emit sparks of anger.

Next moment the light sound of a脚步声 was heard, and as Manuel looked across the room, the door opened and Marian Van Gordon came in.

The millionaire's daughter was pale, but beautiful. She darted a quick and half timid look at Dora whose eyes were already upon her, as if she feared the woman whom she had lately caught ransacking the safe in the library.

"The gentleman has come," smiled Dora in her softest tones to Marian, and then the introduction followed.

Manuel had never seen Marian Van Gordon before.

He had heard much about her from certain parties, but now he stood face to face with her under her own roof.

"She's worth playing for, and so is the million," mentally exclaimed the young man. "This is the place where Dora was startled to encounter Jean the night before the old nabob died. By Jove! if she knew why I am here, I don't think her eyes would have the glow they've got."

For the next ten minutes the three people carried on a lagging conversation.

Marian seemed reserved, she seldom smiled, and Manuel caught her more than once stealing glances at Dora.

When the Queen of the Hoods withdrew and left Manuel and Marian alone, a strange silence filled the parlor.

"You are Mrs. Van Gordon's friend are you not?" suddenly asked Marian.

"I am."

"You have known her a long time, I presume?"

"A few years."

Marian Van Gordon appeared to collect her thoughts for a bold play.

"Mrs. Van Gordon has a great many friends," she resumed looking straight into Manuel's face. "All of them don't come hither, however. Did you know her in Paris, Mr. Drayton?"

Manuel seemed to gasp. "In Paris?" he exclaimed.

"Yes," answered the girl with a placid smile. "You are Manuel, Captain Jean's companion—"

"I—I—Great heavens! Miss Van Gordon, you are mistaken," and Manuel could hardly refrain from springing to his feet.

"Don't get excited," continued the girl, touching his arm as she leaned toward him. "I merely asked a question—nothing more. You see I am posted, though I seldom get out. I don't want to expose you to any one, but I know that you are Manuel, the bosom friend of one Jean Valjen, an escaped convict."

Manuel could not reply.

The bombshell had exploded at his feet, and he was not certain that he was unhurt.

"Ah! you don't want to confess it, I see. Shall I call Mrs. Van Gordon in and tell her—"

"Not for the world!" interrupted the youth. Let me get out of this. The room is so close!"

There was no answer, but Marian's eyes glinted strangely as Manuel picked up his hat and vanished.

The first shot had routed him.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A MILLION AT STAKE.

"MAY the fates take her! She was keeping that charge of dynamite for me. I wonder who put her on to the lay. Who? Ah, who but the sleepless tail-dog who has his kennel on Broadway?"

Thus growled and muttered Manuel while he walked down the sidewalk from the Van Gordon mansion.

He felt dazed. Marian's blow had fallen upon him with the irresistible force of a battle-ax, and he was not quick to recover.

In fact, Manuel scarcely knew which way he was going.

"I don't know what Dora will say about my exit," continued the young man, grinning to himself. "I see that there is war to the knife between the two women, and Marian will not be likely to tell Queen Dora what bounced me. There I am safe, and I'll have a brilliant story made up by the time I see her. She called me Jean's companion. She knows, then, that Jean is here. But does she know the relationship existing between him and Dora?"

Manuel stepped into the first saloon he found, and tried to drown defeat in a brimming glass of his favorite wine, which he happened to find there.

The afternoon had nearly slipped away, and when he consulted his watch he found it to be five o'clock.

"Over yonder's the place," he exclaimed, looking across the busy street he was on, and contemplating two windows with grayish curtains well down. "I wonder if he is in? If I could cross over and deal him a blow that would last, by Jupiter, I'd do it. For, while Captain Coldgrip lives to hunt, we can't succeed."

He was on Broadway and opposite the city sleuth's quarters, and the longer he looked at the windows, the fiercer grew his hatred.

"Don't I know that he posted the girl?" he went on. "No other person could do it. He filled her with the stunning charge she fired at me, and ever since she's been lying in wait like a lioness. What will Captain Jean say? Won't he rave like a lion while his eyes snap like fire balls? And he will put the play on the city shadow who kennels across the street. Of course he will. Well, Captain Claude, I think you'll feel claws at your throat before long."

Manuel lingered in the vicinity until the city clocks were pointing to six.

He seemed to want the New York detective to appear on the scene.

His glances told this. He was restless, angry and revengeful.

"I reckon I've got blood that keeps hot a long time when once heated. I owe my nature to my mother who was said to have had the blood of sunny Spain in her veins. I was born on the sea, under a flag which had no mate; but that makes no difference. I've got blood hot enough to hate an enemy forever. It was my mother's only gift to me. Why doesn't the city sleuth show me his face?"

If Captain Coldgrip was in his office at that moment he did not come down to accommodate the impetuous youth, and Manuel was forced to move on as his strange looks and movements had begun to attract attention.

"Hello! which way?" said a voice at his side before he had proceeded a square.

Manuel turned and looked into the face of the convict schemer.

"Gods! you?" burst from the young man's throat. "I did not expect to see you here."

"Perhaps not. What has happened? You look like a person who has been hit between the eyes."

"That is exactly what has occurred. Where can we go?"

Jean Valjen looked around.

"This way. How lucky that Theodore's isn't a league away," he said.

The next minute the two men were in the back room of a large drinking-house. A number of stalls, some with doors, were arranged along the wall, and at Manuel's suggestion the couple took one.

Then followed Manuel's account of his visit to the Van Gordon Mansion, his reception by Dora, and finally the thunderbolt which had dropped from Marian's tongue.

Jean Valjen listened coolly till the climax was reached. Then he could not keep back a cry.

"Did she say that?" he cried, leaning across the table toward Manuel, with hardly a vestige of natural color in his face. "Did she actually call you Manuel, companion to Jean Valjen?"

"She said nothing else," answered the youth.

The hand of the convict until that moment kept from sight came up, and rested on the table. It was clinched.

"It is Captain Coldgrip's work," he grated, looking at Manuel. "Dora would not have posted her."

"Dora could not for she does not know."

"That is true. Florette knows that I am here, but she never got onto you."

Manuel replied with a slight smile.

"I don't want her to know me," he exclaimed. "I am a member of the Order of which she is the acknowledged head. I saw her eyes flash to-day as they flashed when I stood before the altar of the Black Hoods. She is anxious to have me know Marian. My entrance into the order was easily effected. I seemed to find the way prepared for it, and by Dora, too. What does it mean?"

"You'll have to give me a little time," Jean said. "This woman is deeper than all of her sex. She wants you to meet Marian, eh? And she tells you that the girl shall never be the bride of the lover who is expected from the West? Ah, Manuel, Joel Van Gordon was worth two million when he died. The will found afterward gives Dora one-half! Marian gets the other. I have it! By Jove! how cunning Florette is! She wants the girl's share. She wants Marian to have a husband whom she can manage. Don't you see?"

Manuel drew back and looked wildly at the man across the table.

How shrewd the famous convict was!

"She has taken me for the fool!" suddenly exclaimed the youth.

Jean Valjen laughed.

"Don't you like it?" he cried. "By Jove! I think it a ticket from the wheel of fortune."

"I don't see how."

"Maybe you can't win the play without

Florette's help," Jean went on quickly. "If she wants you to marry Marian she will have it so. She is powerful in her house. The girl cannot fight the battle out against her."

"She has help."

"Whom?"

"Captain Claude."

"Again I say to Halifax with the Broadway ferret! Let me proceed. Without Florette to help on the match, we may never get our fingers on the million. I see a new *role* for you to play, Manuel. You must appear to become the woman's willing tool. She wanted you in the league expressly for that purpose. That is why the Black Hoods received you. At a time when you was not aware of it, Florette selected you for the game against Marian. By Jove! it was fortune, sure enough!"

Manuel heard the rapid talker like a person held spell-bound by some startling revelation.

"You, will accept the situation, won't you?" continued Jean, reaching across the table and grasping his wrist. "Don't say no, for now is the golden opportunity; now is the momentous time. Florette's private scheme will carry us in on the top wave of success. If she gets smart, I will appear on the scene, and the club I can elevate above her head will keep her tractable. I don't care what Marian said to you to-day since I see through Florette's scheme. The New York spotter is the only man in the way, but he'll get out of it before long."

"I'll go ahead, Captain Jean," replied Manuel. "I have told you before that nothing was to stop me. Let me hear you say that the sleuth shall be silenced; say it again."

"By the graves of my dead, he shall be!" spoke the convict, solemnly. "The snake that brushes my foot never gets to bite!"

"That is assurance enough. I accept the future. What about Sunshine Sam?"

"Still missing," said Jean, with a pleased grin. "The Hoods caught him, I say. Try to find out when you meet them again."

"Which will be to-night?"

"Why to-night?"

"I don't know."

"Remember! Make up a plausible tale for Florette. She will want to know why you tore yourself from Marian so suddenly. You are wonderful at invention, Manuel. I will see you any time after midnight at the house, if I get through with a little matter I have on hand. Play into Florette's hands. Do her bidding in every particular; but keep eyes and ears open!"

Manuel promised, and the couple went out.

Jean Valjen stood on the sidewalk and watched the youth until his figure disappeared.

"Events couldn't have taken a more favorable turn," he murmured. "I know Florette so well that I can almost anticipate her plans. She plays in America the same games that used to startle Paris. She was the queen of a secret order there; she sways the same scepter here. I know that the Black Hoods commit some of the most adroit crimes men ever committed. Captain Coldgrip, with all his acumen, little more than suspects. He was trying to get at it when he sent his man Sunshine Sam to his death. Maybe the captain will want to follow his ferret. He will not get the chance!"

Jean Valjen turned and walked up Broadway. Shadows were deepening everywhere about him.

"I've been a year in America, and have done nothing to distinguish myself!" he exclaimed. "What's the use of rusting out in a city like New York? I might drop in upon Florette, but I don't want excitement of this kind just now. Marian might appear on the scene and explode a bomb under my feet. I'll keep in the dark so far as Florette is concerned until Manuel gets fairly into the game. But I'll see what I can do in another direction."

The convict kept on up-town until he reached a certain spot.

His face up to this moment was cleanly shaven, but stepping into an alley he drew a heavy black beard from an inner pocket and adjusted it.

"Now for a crusher!" he muttered as he reappeared on the sidewalk, and looked up at the building on his left. "I once played a card of this kind on a Parisian sleuth, and it won by its suddenness."

He walked to an open hallway, went in, and found a flight of steps.

The following minute he stood in front of a plain door closely shut.

Beyond it was the light of a jet.

"Play it well, Jean," he whispered to himself. "A million depends on the turn of the card in your hand."

Then he opened the door and found himself face to face with a man who did not bear the slightest resemblance to Coldgrip the sleuth.

CHAPTER XIX.

FOLLOWED AND FOUND.

JEAN VALJEN stopped a few feet beyond the door, and stared at the man he had unexpectedly confronted.

It could not be Captain Coldgrip, and the convict felt his coolly-formed plans ooze out at his fingers' ends.

The person before him occupied one of the

office chairs, and there was light enough in the room to show Valjen that he was a man past middle life, plainly, almost poorly dressed, and the possessor of a dark beard.

"Are you Captain Coldgrip?" asked this man of the felon, before he could withdraw.

"No, sir, I am not," answered Jean. "Hasn't he been in since you came?"

"He has not, though he can't be far away for I found the office open. I never saw him, to my recollection, and that is why I asked if you were he. I am anxious to see him."

"A case for him?" suggested Jean, with a peculiar smile.

"Yes, and a pretty bad one, too. I keep a little street stand down-town. Now, it's nothing like some o' the high-toned counters o' them what has money; but I keep a decent place, where one can exchange his loose change for good summer drinks. To-day I was robbed. Don't you think it would take a mighty mean man to fleece the till of Aaron Potts—that's my name?"

"A street thief, eh?" exclaimed Jean, who could not have told why he had been detained in the detective's office by the commonplace story told by the man before him.

"Yes, sir, a street thief!" was the echoing reply. "My back was turned for a moment, and the deed was done."

"How much did you lose?"

"One sixty-seven."

"One hundred and sixty-seven dollars?"

"Jehosaphat, no! I'm no millionaire. One dollar and sixty-seven cents."

Jean Valjen came very near bursting into a laugh, but the earnestness of the speaker's expression restrained him.

"Do you think Captain Coldgrip will undertake the case?" asked Jean.

"I don't know; I came here to see. What do you think?"

"I'm afraid he will not."

"No? Then he will take yours, I presume. I'll wait for him a while longer. Won't you stay to keep me company?"

Jean declined the invitation.

"I can wait below till he comes and dismisses the old fellow," he thought, and then he turned to the door and walked out.

Jean's footsteps had barely died away on the stair ere Aaron Potts left his chair.

There was a spark of merriment in his eyes.

"He is as cool as a thug!" exclaimed the man.

"He came here on mischief bent, but my appearance took all the wind out of his sails. Can't you see through a disguise with those keen eyes of yours, Jean Valjen? I almost laughed in your face once, for you took down the fictitious robbery as a Coney Island swell takes down the first 'saddle rock' of the season. What was your scheme, anyhow? I missed something by receiving you as Aaron Potts and not as Claude Coldgrip."

The "old man" was the Broadway sleuth himself!

He had missed "something" by receiving Jean as he had, for the convict had come to the kennel for the purpose of playing one of the most sudden and desperate hands ever played in Gotham.

Perhaps it was lucky for Captain Claude that he had not been recognized by the felon, and he had a right to congratulate himself on the peaceful termination of the interview.

After awhile the detective, still disguised as Aaron Potts, the street-stand man, locked the door of his office and went down-stairs.

At a convenient distance from the open hallway, and on the sidewalk, lounged Jean Valjen.

Captain Coldgrip saw him at once, and noticed that he was watching the entrance with the eye of a hawk.

"I guess he ain't going to come. I've given 'im up," said the city sleuth, appearing suddenly before Jean, who started slightly at sight of him.

"I nosed about the office till I found a letter which told me that he's been gone some time. He left it for some party, and whoever it was left the door open when he went out. That's about the whole story I reckon. I shut the door when I came out, and it locked with a snap. Guess I'll have to wait awhile before I can put the captain on the track o' the thief who tapped my till. Good-night, sir. Sorry we've been disappointed. Couldn't be helped, you know."

Jean Valjen managed to growl out a parting salutation, and the masked spotter vanished.

"If that's the case, I needn't fool around here," observed the convict, to himself. "By Jove! if I had found Captain Claude alone, wouldn't I have shown him the famous catapult trick we used to play in Paris? His absence was all that saved him. Some other time, my Broadway sleuth-hound."

Jean did not stop to follow the movements of the supposed street man, but walked in an opposite direction.

"Whither is the fellow going?" suddenly exclaimed Captain Claude, who had not lost sight of the felon. "I need not carry out my formed plans right off. Give me an hour's play, will you, Jean? Is it over the river to the Brooklyn house, or to Mother Medusa's palace of prophecy?"

Captain Coldgrip, dodging in and out among the evening crowds on Broadway, was in his element.

Not for a moment did he lose sight of the rascal, who walked fast, though with no apparent desire to get rid of any particular person.

One hour later the figure of a peculiarly-dressed man was seen to enter a certain house, and when the woman who opened the door turned on the man, she uttered a low cry of astonishment.

"They're watching you!" she exclaimed, clutching her visitor's arm. "You were followed from here by two men the night you came here and took away the letter which I discovered in the setting of the diamond pin."

"I know all that, Nina," was the answer, and Captain Coldgrip in Aaron Potts's garments smiled complacently in the woman's face.

"Do you know who they were?" asked Nina, quickly.

"I think I do."

"Jess says—"

Here the woman was checked by the appearance of a boy of fourteen who came into the room with a pair of boyish black eyes riveted upon the detective.

"Here is Jess to answer for himself," Nina went on.

The boy walked up to and around the disguised Coldgrip and looked at him admiringly for several seconds.

"Oh, but you're a daisy, cap'n!" was his curt comment. "But, I say, boss, did mother tell you that you were followed when you went away from here last?" he suddenly asked.

"I was not unaware of it. Did you see the trackers?"

"Didn't I, though?" returned Jess, his eyes getting a new glow. "They thought they were doing great things. But their play didn't prevent 'em from losing the man next door, eh?"

This allusion to Tolbert's escape from the clutches of his persecutors was not noticed by Captain Claude.

"What do you know about those men, Jess?"

"One o' 'em was Diamond Dust, the man who was held three days by the p'lice for helping in the Union Safety robbery."

"Yes."

"The other was Light Finger, a fellow what has the Battery for his hunting-ground. Them's the two chappies what took you in tow after you left the house."

"Have you seen them since?"

"Don't ask me now," grimed the boy. "Isn't Light Finger waitin' for you now at the mouth o' the alley?"

"And Diamond Dust also?"

"No. Lighty has a new partner—a fellow said to be the strongest kid-gloved sharp in Gotham."

"Not Prince Patsy?"

"Nobody else, captain."

Without replying to the shrewd boy, Coldgrip turned to the woman, who had listened to the conversation without a word.

"Nina, I am here on business," he explained. "You told me that when I wanted the ring I should have it."

Nina started.

"Must you have it?" she asked.

"Yes."

"And I am not to be dragged to the witness stand no matter what happens?"

"You are not."

A smile of satisfaction stole over the sallow face of the once beautiful woman.

Turning from the city sleuth she thrust one hand into her bosom and drew forth the little ivory box wrapped in paper.

"It is here," she resumed, placing the packet in the detective's hand.

"I haven't prospered since the accursed thing came into my possession. I will not ask you what you are going to do with the ring, Captain Claude. I do not want to know, but if it will help you to avenge Joel Van Gordon, I shall be satisfied. He persecuted me for his wife's sake. Don't spare the guilty! Let the stroke fall heedless of who may be crushed."

Captain Coldgrip transferred the box to his pocket without opening it.

"When are you going to clear up the case?" asked Nina.

"Before long," was the answer. "I am picking the chain up, link by link."

"You will not fail?"

The response was a smile which must have assured the woman. The boy's eyes fairly glistered.

"The captain hasn't failed yet!" averred Jess. "I'd like to see the sharp cunning enough to beat him!"

"I don't want to give the two watch-dogs a chance just now," continued the detective.

"Then Jess will show you out the back way."

Guided by Nina's boy, the Broadway spotter was pushing toward the street which ran in the rear of the house, and in a little while he was once more at large.

"I think we gave the hounds the slip," he observed, while he walked off; "the boy, Jess, has the making of a detective in him. Maybe some day I'll stand him in my shoes, and make a Coldgrip, Jr., out of him."

Once more, moving down the street, the city sleuth was in good humor over the two successes he had scored since sundown.

He soon forgot the two sharps mentioned by Jess, but they had not forgotten him.

All at once a footstep that meant something approached the detective.

He did not look back, for even if he heard it, which was doubtful, he gave it no second thought.

Therefore, he did not see the man who came up with him in the shadow of a big tenement at the mouth of an alley.

Suddenly something was lifted above Captain Coldgrip's head, then it came down with terrible force and without sound, and the sleuth reeled and dropped.

CHAPTER XX.

BACK TO SUNSHINE SAM.

WE go back in our story a few hours.

We thread the streets of New York from the spot where, for the present, we leave the city sleuth till we reach a house whose outward appearance indicated grimness, mystery, crime within.

The reader has been across the threshold before now, for a few chapters back he passed its portals with Sunshine Sam when that worthy was in the grip of the masked men who had cornered him in the detective's office.

There are to-day many houses of similar build and looks in Gotham. Some are uninhabited by people as honest as the length of the day, but others are the abode of those who fear not the "thou shalt nots" of the statutes.

The house was an old affair.

In the rear it had a high roof which proclaimed that it was not a child of this present age.

There was no sign of inhabitants about it, but for all this it was not deserted.

By no means.

The last gleams of departing daylight came in at one of the windows of a square room with a wall-smoked and lofty ceiling.

They fell upon a man who was large of body and well boned.

He had, as one might have seen, even in the poor light, a cadaverous look, and that from a wild, deep-sunken eye.

A second glance would have been required to have recognized Sunshine Sam in this man, the only tenant of the room with its wall paper of almost ancient date, yet he was no one else.

Not one of the iron bars of the windows had been broken, but particles of fresh rust on the floor beneath the sills told that the hand of man had been at work.

Nobody had come to the sun lizard since his imprisonment. Not a sound had reached his ears save the usual ones that come into all houses from the busy streets.

No food had been brought to his dungeon, and not a drop of water had reached his tongue.

Since the departure of the two masked men, Sunshine Sam had not caught a glimpse of a human face.

He had cursed the ill luck through which he had fallen into the snare, but that was soon after his incarceration. For hours he had not murmured, scarcely spoken, as if the doom impending over him had deprived him of speech.

He did not know what part of the city he was inhabiting.

The hurried trip from the cab to the house had prevented him from inspecting it, and during the day he had listened at the window, hoping to gather from the voices outside something certain concerning the location of his prison.

But in vain.

Sunshine Sam seemed lost to the world, lost as completely as if he had been buried in the caissons of the great bridge.

More than a hundred times had he made the rounds of his dungeon like a tiger makes a path around the walls of his cage.

"I guess I might as well sit down and wait till the change comes," exclaimed Sam at last.

"It's bound to come some time, and I want to be in good fix to meet it. The captain won't know where to look; that is what puzzles me. He can't know that I was snared in his office. Nobody will tell him. It looks almighty black. This is worse than playing spy in the chamber of the Black Hoods. By Jupiter! I'd sooner be there than here!"

Sam genuinely thought thus.

He went to the little opening—a mere crack—at the window, and saw that another night was falling.

Already the lamps had been lit, and the bustle of the day was dying away.

It was some quiet street that Sam was quartered on, but near by, as his trained ears told him, was one of the great thoroughfares of New York.

People went by laughing, but no one stopped.

The prisoner of the old trap leaned against the iron bars and listened with his dry lips apart, and the wild gleam of a hungry, desperate man in his eyes.

The day fled and night came back.

"Mebbe they'll come now," thought Sam. Minutes were hours to the city sleuth's spy.

He went back to his chair, threw himself

upon it and stretched his aching legs. He was sore all over, but his brain was as clear as ever.

All at once there came to his ears a sound for which he had waited ever since his entrance into the trap.

It was caused by the opening and shutting of a door.

Sunshine Sam turned to the door by which he had entered the house, and waited.

Some one was in the old house. At last!

But many minutes passed away, and no other noise succeeded.

"Was I mistaken?" queried Sam, thrilled by the sound of his own husky voice. "I've been harassed enough to imagine almost anything; but I certainly heard a noise. I know—"

Another noise like the first broke the sun lizard's sentence, and he leaned toward the door with the top of the heavy chair gripped in his hands.

At this moment the gas jet burning over his head began to flicker.

It made Sam's shadow dance on the bare floor.

"What does the crazy thing mean?" cried Sunshine, looking up, and then the light went out, leaving him in pitch darkness!

For a second the prisoner of the Hoods knew not what to make of the strange occurrence.

Was it an accident, or by design?

The darkness could almost be felt, and for a moment after the death of the light, the silence of a mummy's tomb surrounded Sam.

It meant something. It was the calm of fate before the cyclone of destruction.

At last a scraping sound came down from overhead. Sunshine Sam looked up but could see nothing.

After the interval of a minute the sound was repeated, and then little objects like detached plaster fell upon his upturned face.

"This is one of the traps of New York!" exclaimed Sam. "I have heard o' them, but they were always located along the river. Where this one is heaven knows, but it isn't likely to post Captain Claude who said he would be my avenger if anything happened."

The scraping which continued at intervals mystified the sun lizard.

Particles of plaster continued to fall on his face.

"Something is happening!" he cried. "I believe the ceiling is creeping down along the side walls."

Horrible as the thought was, it sent at first a look of ridicule into Sam's eyes, but it was soon dismissed.

He sprung upon his chair and elevated his hands.

He could touch the ceiling!

A cold chill swept unchecked to the heart of the street spy. As surely as fate the ceiling was coming down upon him!

How long it would be before it crushed him he could not say, but at the rate it was moving now the time would be short.

It might be twenty minutes; at the furthest, not more than an hour could elapse.

Sunshine Sam remained on the chair until he could feel the pressure of the ceiling.

It was not for him to guess what sort of machinery impelled the novel engine of death. It was enough to know that it was terrible reality, and not a phantasm of the brain.

While he stood on the chair Sam recollects having read somewhere a story similar to his own experience. He remembered that the hero of the drama was named Vinenzio and that the ceiling which had crushed him existed in China.

Could it be that the brain which had called the present fatal ceiling into existence, had gained its knowledge from the same story?

Sam dismissed the thought. He had more to think about than that.

Quitting his chair he felt his way to one of the barred windows.

"I've got to do something or perish like a badger under a dead-fall!" he exclaimed.

He knew that the inside sill of the window was a few inches wide, and that some space existed between the sash and the squares of iron.

Driven to desperation, he gripped the bars, first one, and then another, as if seeking a weak one.

Once more the ceiling ground above his head.

"Another inch!" thought Sam. "That's another nail in my coffin if I stay here. By the eternal stars, they won't find a coward when they come to administer on my effects."

He tugged at the bar with all his might. He threw himself back and gave all his strength to the task.

Once, twice, three times he jerked, and then the bars yielded!

The rusted screws at the right of the window had seen their best days, but with no ceiling moving down upon him Sunshine Sam could not have started them.

As the victory had been won without noise, he got his breath and pulled the net-work of bars back, then adroitly twisted the same off and laid it on the floor.

He now had the window before him, and between him and the street were the sash and a shutter which might be fastened on the outside.

Sunshine Sam climbed up to the sill and felt above his head.

The ceiling was at the top of the window moving remorselessly on.

The sill was narrower than he thought. It seemed to offer a poor asylum, but the detective's spy said to himself that it was better than none.

The window-glass and the shutter were close together.

Sam put his back against the former and broke one as noiselessly as possible.

The shutter beyond it was iron, and apparently as solid as a stone wall!

Meanwhile the ceiling was at hand!

Holding his breath, Sunshine Sam got into the best position possible, and waited.

The space he had to fill was barely ample enough to shelter a boy, but he had to put up with it.

Down came the ceiling, dropping now two inches at a time, scraping the fringe of the casement, and rendering Sam's position one of extreme horror.

He drew back with the agony of the moment depicted on his countenance; he counted the terrible seconds by the beatings of his heart.

Down, down, down!

Sunshine Sam could not move another inch. He had broken through the sash and was pressing the shutter hard.

At last the terrible ceiling crushed the table and then stood still.

Sunshine Sam was missing!

CHAPTER XXI.

THE MISSING SLEUTH.

On the third day after the descent of the iron ceiling, a young girl went up the steps that led to Captain Coldgrip's office on Broadway and knocked at the door.

There was no response from within, and the taps were taken up and repeated in a hollow echo.

"He isn't in, miss. I haven't seen anything of him for three days," said a voice near the caller, and she saw the speaker, a man who had a room across the hall from the detective's.

"Three days?" exclaimed the young woman, whose face was quite pale.

"That's about the time. He must be out of the city."

"When did you see him last?"

"I—I can't say without thinking," was the reply. "It was more'n three days ago. He's a queer fellow, like all the rest o' them detectives. He never tells any one when he's going away, nor how long he expects to be gone, leaves no information on the door for callers, nothing o' the kind."

Captain Claude's caller turned away with a look of deep disappointment in her eyes, and the man watching her for a moment went back and shut his door.

The girl went slowly down the steps to the street.

"I guess you didn't find him!" exclaimed a man, who had caught sight of her the moment she stepped upon the sidewalk. "You got no information either, for there's nobody up there who knows anything about 'im. Circumvented at last! The trail-dog has his day like all other canines, and the street hound's was bound to come."

In the warm sun of the afternoon the sleuth's caller stood revealed as Marian Van Gordon. It was the second time she had left the house since her father's death, and it is not strange that she should have directed her steps to the great detective's office.

Marian had not heard from him for somedays, and as she had something to communicate, she had stolen down-town for the purpose of obtaining an uninterrupted interview where there could be no interested listeners.

"Not seen for three days? What does it mean?" mentally queried Marian as she moved off. "Can some accident have befallen him? Have Dora and her friends thrust him aside by some bold play? I look to him for help. Father made Captain Coldgrip the executor of vengeance before he died. It was his last act, and he did it while death had him in his grasp. Have I lost my best friend in New York? I pray Heaven that it is not so."

The man who had seen Marian emerge from the building did not follow her far.

He did not seem to think it necessary, and Marian was left to pursue her way without interruption.

"I went to her once and she showed me a terrible sight which soon came to pass," suddenly resumed the girl. "It was so ghastly that I swooned in her house and had to be taken home. I will go to her again. I will look into the magic mirror, and listen calmly to all she reveals. Mother Medusa must know more than common mortals. Her strange prophecies and the following events confirm this."

As the abode of the sorceress was some distance from Coldgrip's office, Marian took a hack which she found at a corner, and gave the driver the necessary orders.

Not long afterward she was set down at the door of Mother Medusa's house, and a moment later stood within the mystic precincts.

A chill passed over Marian's frame while she waited in the famous room for the sorceress. She recalled her last visit to the place.

Then she was drawn thither by curiosity, and with no belief in Medusa's power. She had not forgotten the incantations of the sorceress, the mystical smoke which seemed to emanate from the serpent bracelets at her wrists, and the magic mirror in which she saw a draped coffin with the initials V. G. on the lid.

The scene had proved too much for her, and a swoon was the result.

A few days later her father was found dead on the floor of his private chamber, and the initials which she had seen at Medusa's had a startling reality.

Marian did not have to wait long for the woman of magic and mystery.

With somewhat stately step Medusa came into the room and smiled faintly when she saw the patron in waiting.

"What is it, my child?" asked the woman, bending over Marian while her eyes seemed to snap with delight. "Wouldst thou have the future revealed to thee again?"

"Not the future so much as the past," answered Marian courageously.

"People know the past," said the woman. "They come to me for the lifting of the veil which hides the future. But what part of the past wouldst thou see, my child?"

"I want to know what has become of a friend."

"Ah! when the influences are against me I cannot always trace out missing people," was Medusa's retort. "You have a friend who is missing?"

"Yes."

"A dear friend, my child?"

"A friend on whom I rely," replied Marian.

"Mention not his name to me but write it on this tablet and cast the same into the brazier yonder."

Mother Medusa handed Marian a small ivory tablet to which was attached a pencil, and the next moment the girl wrote across it the name:

"CLAUDE COLDGRIP."

The pencil left a weird blue mark, and when Marian had completed her task she cast the tablet into the receptacle which the woman had designated.

Instantly a smoke rose above the brazier, and for several moments continued to ascend toward the ceiling.

Medusa stepped behind the curtain at one end of the room and came out with a small oval mirror in her hand.

The following minute she was bending over the smoking coals with her eyes gazing intently upon them.

Marian watched her closely, wondering what would be the next event.

All at once Medusa thrust the glass into the smoke, held it there a few moments and then jerked it out.

"See?" she exclaimed, holding the mirror toward the girl. "You have asked for a friend. What is the magic mirror's reply?"

Breathless and white faced, the girl leaned forward.

At first she saw nothing for a film seemed to obscure the surface of the glass.

"What dost thou see?" asked the sorceress.

"A river with houses on each bank," was the response. "The river is the main part of the picture—"

"As it should be," was the quick answer.

The girl looked up into the woman's face.

"What does it mean?"

"Ah! do you not know? You seek a friend; the river comes to solve the mystery."

A wild cry parted Marian Van Gordon's lips.

"I will not believe it!" she exclaimed. "The river does not hold Captain Coldgrip. The magic mirror is at fault for once!"

The look she got from the sorceress was enough to make her recoil.

"They who laugh at the prophecy of the mirror are always the first to recognize its potency," she whispered. "If you did not want the truth why did you come to Medusa the sorceress, my child? There are those in New York who will tell you anything if you cover their palms with coin. You have covered mine with nothing, yet the mirror has spoken."

Marian stood speechless before the fortuneteller of Gotham.

"You would not believe more if I were to show you the bottom of the river," Medusa went on. "You came from your palace home to consult me. You will go back and wait for the friend who is in the eternal grasp of fate."

The girl drew back.

"Is this all?" continued Medusa.

"It is all."

Marian took out her purse and began to take out some coin when the hand of the sorceress touched her wrist.

"Not a dollar!" she said, sternly, as she caught Marian's eye. "I don't want a pennyweight of your gold, Marian Van Gordon. If you don't believe the answer of the mirror you will need your money in your search for Captain Coldgrip, as you call him. Shut up your purse!"

Marian did so without reply, and while the

fingers of Medusa seem to burn their way to the bone.

"Come," she proceeded, and the girl found herself leaving the chair as if lifted up by unseen power.

A moment later she was conducted from the room, and into the darkened hall beyond.

"When you are ready to believe the Fates, come back, not before!" said the sorceress at her ear, and the fingers dropped from Marian's lips.

The door opened without human touch so far as the girl could see, and she turned away.

On the step, however, she looked back, and saw beyond Medusa's shoulders the grinning face of a man!

She saw it for a moment only, but in that brief time it was photographed indelibly on her mind.

Then the door shut, and Marian found herself in the afternoon sunlight on the witch's step.

"I'll prove her magic mirror a false prophet!" she exclaimed, going toward her carriage.

"She will never convince me that the river holds Claude Coldgrip back from vengeance. I am but a woman, but I have wealth at my command, and I'll pour it out without stint to prove the sorceress a base charlatan."

She stepped into the vehicle and gave the driver some orders, and the horses moved off.

"What is this?" suddenly exclaimed Marian, leaning forward and picking up a bit of white paper which lay on the opposite seat. "I did not leave it here when I got out. It has been placed here since. Ah! a message!"

With eyes that plainly showed the excitement under which she labored, the beautiful girl unfolded the paper and leaned toward the light.

Then, while the carriage bore her over the street, she read the following brief and mysterious message:

"Do not despair. A blow has fallen, but it is not a deadly one. The fiends are at work, and the Broadway sleuth has felt their power. Don't trust the witch you have just seen. Keep your eyes open in your own house. It will be light soon, and justice will get her own, or I'm no prophet."

Marian read the letter twice.

It mystified her greatly, but of one thing she felt certain. It had not been written by Captain Claude.

On the spur of the moment she asked the driver if he had seen any one about the hack; the man shook his head and said no.

CHAPTER XXII.

A QUESTION OF CLAWS.

MARIAN VAN GORDON had not been absent long from her home, but in the interval something startling had taken place there.

Hardly had the young girl left the house on her errand to Captain Coldgrip's office ere a man walked up the steps and jerked the bell.

The door was opened by a maid who apparently had orders to be careful whom she admitted, for she eyed the caller closely, and seemed ready to refuse him admittance.

"I am expected," said the man, pushing forward. "Tell Mrs. Van Gordon that the gentleman who was to call at three is in the house."

Completely vanquished by the fellow's assurance, the maid drew back, and the visitor walked boldly into the left-hand parlor.

He was not kept waiting long.

In a few moments a light step announced the approach of some one, and the man turned his eyes upon the door in time to see Dora Van Gordon enter the room.

The Queen of the Black Hoods came forward on the lookout for her visitor, and when he left his chair and stood before her, she came to a sudden halt, and leaned toward him.

"You?" she exclaimed, coloring deeply.

"You? I thought you were not coming back."

"Why not?" answered the man, with a smile. "You did not think I had gone back to the hulk, eh, Florette?"

Dora started at the sound of the name.

She looked hastily around, and seeing that she had left the door ajar, she shut it carefully before she continued.

"What do you want?" she demanded.

Her manner was haughty and raspy.

"Now, don't go off like a powder magazine just because I've dropped in," answered the man, who, as the reader has guessed ere this, was Jean Valjen, the convict. "I could not remain away any longer, and, as I had not heard from you, I thought a call might not prove mutually disagreeable."

Dora was on the point of saying something which she suddenly thought might be better left unsaid.

"We ought not to antagonize one another," she replied, in calmer tones.

"I don't see why we should. Our interests used to be the same."

The woman did not appear to hear the last sentence.

"Where are you staying now?" asked Dora.

"Here, there and everywhere," laughed Jean.

"Still afraid of the pointers, eh?"

"No! I am bravely over that. I never liked fixed habitations, you know. You are well fixed here, Dora."

"Fairly well," was the answer.

"I knew you would make it in America. You found the gold-fish the first time you threw in your hook."

Dora did not smile, but her eyes got a sparkle as they regarded the man.

"This is better than being troubled in Paris. What splendor surrounds you here! Where did you get yon picture? It is French, isn't it? Old associations, I see."

Dora Van Gordon bit her lip while she glared at Jean, apparently studying a magnificent painting that adorned one of the walls.

She let him have his look out without interrupting him.

"So you have no fixed abode?" she said at length, still watching him.

"None."

"Aren't you afraid the American cops will ferret you out?"

"Are they good at that?" asked Jean, with the most innocent of airs, which did not deceive the quick-witted woman. "They haven't bothered me yet."

"Perhaps not, but some of the reward-papers which they got out when your absence was discovered are likely to reach these shores. Twenty thousand francs are not picked up every day by the American police. You may be safe tonight, in a dungeon cell to-morrow."

A smile played with the convict's lips while Dora talked.

"Let to-morrow take care of itself!" he exclaimed. "Let us get down to business, for I have mixed business with pleasure in coming here. I am actually in need, Dora. One cannot live on nothing in New York, and I have realized this."

"In other words, you want money?" exclaimed the woman.

"Money, the root of all evil," smiled Jean. "The death of Mr. Van Gordon left you with a comfortable sum—more than we ever touched across the sea."

"It is not much."

"Not more than a solid million, I am told."

"It is a million, but that is nothing, the way they count riches nowadays."

"I've seen the time when I would have given it for a file and a saw. I'm not here to rob you. I don't want to take much of your wealth. I want only enough to give me a lift for the present."

"How much?"

The woman was growing impatient.

"I want five thousand now; that—"

"Five thousand now, and how much afterward?" cried Dora. "Ten thousand next week, and twice that amount the week after. I know your old tactics."

"And I am not ignorant concerning yours," was the instant retort.

"What will you do for the amount mentioned?"

"I'll let you suggest."

Mrs. Van Gordon seemed amazed at the coolness of the man before her.

"I think I understand you," she said.

"I presume he never knew that we were once made man and wife?" continued Jean. "Of course you never told him about the marriage ceremony in the little chapel? Ah, Florette, you kept a skeleton in the closet while you were the wife of Monsieur Van Gordon."

"That's enough!" cried Dora. "I can't afford to let my people hear insinuations like these. You say you must have money?"

"Five thousand."

"Wait for me here."

Dora stepped back and vanished.

"I can't wait for Manuel to play his hand. He is too slow," murmured Jean, when he found himself alone. "He seems to be getting along with Dora, who will see that he marries Marian, the heiress, if it be in her power; but, hang it all! the young man is playing with a torpedo. Should the Black Hoods discover that he came to them direct from me, they wouldn't give him a chance for his life. It is a dangerous game. I will play one to suit myself, and I'll show this woman that the grip of Jean Valjen never relaxes, no matter in which world he holds his prey!"

Dora went up-stairs. Her face was pale and her hands were clinched.

"Yield to-day and be bled to-morrow," she mused. "He knows nothing about late events, but he can give me trouble. He may be able to produce the French marriage-certificate, for when I went to look for it I found it gone. Jean Valjen was always desperate. He will not hesitate to expose me if I yield now and turn from his next demand."

She kept on to her own room, the door of which she shut behind her.

Going to a marble-topped dressing-stand, she opened a drawer and took out a small ivory-handled revolver.

There was determination in every line of the woman's face.

She looked carefully to the loading of the revolver and saw that each chamber was charged.

She did not take a dollar in money from any

place; she had left Jean for the sole purpose of gaining possession of the weapon.

For several moments the Queen of the Hoods stood before the mirror calming her excitement.

"I want to show him that I am the same Florette who, as Queen of the Mystic Hand, once had the trail-dogs of Paris baffled. He does not think of that period. It was his confession that opened the doors of La Petite Roquette for me, and I ought to pay him for that. I think I can meet him now."

Concealing the revolver in the folds of her dress, Dora turned back to the man in the parlor.

He did not hear her step till she opened the door, and then he turned to her with a smile of anticipation.

All at once something with a polish caught the rays of light that came in at one of the windows, and Jean Valjen recoiled with a cry to behold Dora erect before him with a revolver that covered his head!

The man was thunderstruck.

This was the five thousand dollars he was to get—a bullet instead of a bill!

Dora held the revolver with the nerve of an old marksman, and the convict saw behind it an eye that could send the leaden messenger to the center of the target.

"I must meet this tigress with claws equal to her own," passed like a flash through Jean's brain. "If I waver I am dead, for I know her as Florette, and Florette never stopped at anything."

"Five thousand I believe it was," suddenly came over the revolver. "I have concluded not to pay a cent. I will not pay to-day to be dogged to-morrow. I have you at the mercy of the woman whom you could have saved from La Roquette if you had opened your mouth."

"If I had opened it and lied," answered Jean.

Dora smiled.

"A shot in this house will not be heard outside," she went on with provoking coolness. "You have come to the wrong bank for money. There is plenty of it here, Jean Valjen, but not a dollar for the escaped Rat of the New Caledonia trap."

"Are you going to touch that trigger, madam?" asked the convict.

"Why shouldn't I? What is your life worth to me? A pistol-shot is as good as a divorce; don't you see, Jean?"

The sarcastic laugh of the fair fiend had no melody for Jean Valjen.

It made him grind his teeth.

"Touch the trigger and hasten the catastrophe," he retorted. "Do your worst, Florette—play tigress in New York as you used to play in Paris. But, let me say that with the crack of your revolver comes in the victory of justice. Do you think I came hither unprepared? I had pards in Paris. Are they hard to find in New York? There exists to-day, where it is entirely safe, a certain paper backed up with evidence that will blanch your cheek. It is the life history of a woman who was the wife of a felon. Press the trigger if you think it will rid you of the proof of the past. There are Petite Roquettes in this country, Florette. There are courts here that hang for murder by poison!"

The last word was a hiss, and with it the leveled pistol dropped.

"Why don't you shoot?" laughed Jean.

There was no answer. Dora's look was a wild stare.

"Good-day! I'll see you later," continued the convict passing before her.

"It was a question of claws, and mine proved the best!" grinned the scoundrel as he left the house.

CHAPTER XXIII.

STARTLING.

In three days Manuel had advanced far into the graces of the Queen of the Black Hoods. He had spun an adroit yarn concerning his sudden exit from the Van Gordon Mansion after the explosion of Marian's bomb, and Dora, believing him to be the very man she sought, unfolded a part of her plan.

If she had dreamed that Manuel had entered the secret league at Jean Valjen's suggestion, a startling event might have occurred.

But as yet Dora, with all her cunning, was unsuspecting, and Manuel was getting along nicely when Jean had his exciting adventure at the house on the avenue.

"You had to lie your way out, did you?" exclaimed the young man when he had listened to Jean's story a short time after the event.

"It was the only way out, and by Jupiter! I wasn't going to scruple at a little falsehood," was the answer, and the convict laughed. "I wish you could see Florette when her eyes are on fire and she stands before you like a statue of destruction. It was a sight I had not witnessed in full since I saw her before the judge with the sentence to La Petite Roquette ringing in her ears. But I have not seen you since you promised to discover something about the fate of Sunshine Sam."

Manuel smiled.

"I guess the sun lizard is done for," he said.

"By the Hoods, eh?" cried Jean. "They finished Captain Claude's spy, did they?"

There was no answer.

"I see! You know the secret, but your oath seals your lips. I know something about such things, boy. They made quick work of the spy: he didn't have a long breathing-spell."

"Not very long."

"Now be certain that he is out of the way. Some of these human ferrets have more lives than a cat. Coldgrip is said to be one of them. I was going to test him when I went to his office, but when I found the old street-stand man in, I felt my plans ooze out at my finger's ends. Jehu! I'd have given my share in the bonanza if Aaron Potts had been Captain Coldgrip."

Young Manuel coolly broke the end off a cigar, and leaned toward Jean, with a twinkle in the depths of his eyes.

"Don't you know where the captain is?" he asked. "Haven't you been able to find him since you left his office?"

"Confound it, no!" ejaculated Jean. "But by Jove! I believe you know something. I see it by your eyes. Out with it, Manuel."

Manuel leaned back in his chair, and lit the cigar.

He seemed in no hurry to satisfy his eager companion.

"Well, Captain Jean," he resumed at last, "I guess the way is clear all along the line."

"Do you mean that the Broadway sleuth has been trapped?"

"Did I say so?"

"No, but I can read between the lines when my head is as clear as it is to-day. Trapped, was he? By George! who was slick enough to do it?"

"Somebody shrewder than he," said Manuel.

"Then he was a dandy if Captain Claude hasn't been lied on. Can you tell me how it happened? But, better still, can you prove that the Broadway kennel is to remain empty?"

"I think I can prove it," and the young man glanced at his watch and noted the time.

"It is now dark where there are no lamps. I would rather furnish the proofs than let my tongue wag."

"Perhaps it would be better, boy."

A few seconds later two men came out of the Brooklyn rendezvous, and walked rapidly toward the bridge.

They were Manuel and Jean.

As they did not expect to be dogged, they did not look for spies.

What was the use of it when both the Broadway sleuth and his apt pupil Sunshine Sam had fallen into traps from which escape was impossible?

The two men crossed into New York and Manuel, who was the guide, turned to the right, and walked toward the wharves.

Night had fairly fallen over the metropolis, but the streets were alive with people.

Manuel led the way through street after street, now and then exchanging a word with Jean, but for the most part silent.

At length he darted down a flight of basement steps, and knocked at a door which was opened by a Gypsy-skinned youth of nineteen.

The two friends entered the house, and Manuel opened a door at the furthest side of the darkened room.

"In Heaven's name, are you going down into the catacombs?" cried Jean, when he was ushered into a narrow corridor where he could not see his hand when held close to his face.

Manuel sent a low laugh over his shoulder.

After awhile the explorers of the subterranean passage found some steps which they ascended to a door that opened into a room as bare as the chambers of a deserted house.

"There's no detective here," observed Jean, throwing a look around the room.

"Maybe not," said Manuel.

Crossing the room, the young man opened a door which led into another. It was also devoid of furniture.

"You shall see in a moment," he smiled, looking at Jean, whose patience seemed well-nigh exhausted. "We are near our journey's end."

A moment later Manuel unlocked the door of a closet, and disclosed more steps.

"This way," he whispered to Jean, and the two plunged into the dark place which stood revealed.

There were twelve steps downward, and then the couple stood on ground.

Manuel struck a noiseless match and lit a waxen taper which he took from his pocket.

The little light did not dissipate much of the gloom that prevailed, but gradually Jean saw the well-cemented walls of the cellar with a smooth floor.

Manuel walked forward, holding his improvised candle before him. His eyes were full of excitement and on the alert.

When he stopped he was before an oblong box which rested on a stout bier-like structure. There was about it the ghastly suggestion of a coffin, and the hunted convict who leaned forward to get a look at it felt a momentary chill sweep over his frame.

The youth fixed the taper in a socket, which

extended beyond the wall for that purpose, and took a knife from his pocket.

"You want the proofs, eh?" he exclaimed, turning toward Jean Valjen.

"If you've got 'em, yes," was the reply, and Manuel began to loosen a screw with the blade.

Jean looked on with intense curiosity.

Not a word was uttered while Manuel worked, and the only sound was a dull one which came from Jean knew not where.

At length several screws were withdrawn, and Manuel put up the knife.

"Now for the proofs," he said in almost sepulchral tone, as he began to lift the lid of the oblong box. "Here we have the sleuth silent at last; here ends the trail which was never to bring him victory!"

The taper at the wall threw a ghostly light on the scene.

Jean went forward and bent over the box.

One look seemed to be enough for him.

"Where's your man?" he suddenly exclaimed, starting back and showing Manuel a face white with horror.

A singular cry broke over Manuel's lips.

"Isn't—he—there?" he gasped.

The next second he was looking into the box with a pair of eyes that seemed about to fly from his head.

Jean said nothing.

He saw Manuel's face get a ghastly shade, and then heard him utter a wild exclamation as he recoiled terror-stricken.

The oblong box was empty!

"In the name of fate, what does it mean?" whispered Manuel, as he came shuddering back, and with a supply of courage mustered for the occasion, gazed into the coffin once more. "He was there—I know it—dead! dead!"

"But he isn't there now," observed Jean, with a grin. "Dead men don't unscrew their coffins and walk away."

Manuel was speechless.

"When was he brought here?" continued the convict.

"The same night you went to his office and found the old street vender there."

The convict was about to reply when he heard the dull sound which had saluted his ears ever since entering the cellar.

"What is that noise?" he asked.

"The river," was the response.

"Are we so close?"

"Yes. We are below the surface of the water. To-night it was to have rushed in here and remain—I guess forever."

"It was to hasten the decay of the Broadway sleuth, was it?"

"That is it."

"But something has happened. Captain Coldgrip has either been removed by a friend—"

"He had no friend to perform the office. Sunshine Sam met his doom when the iron roof came down."

"The iron roof?" exclaimed Jean. "Is Florette playing the Parisian trick in America?"

Manuel looked at his companion, but did not speak.

"Mebbe your people took him away," the convict went on.

"That wasn't the plan," was the prompt reply. "The water was to have been turned on, I tell you."

"At what hour?"

"At eight o'clock."

"I see no pipes," and Jean sent an inquiring look around the cellar.

"Of course not," laughed Manuel. "You square stone in the wall hides the pipe. When the signal is given the water will force it from its place, and within twenty minutes the whole cellar will be flooded. By Jove! it lacks but five minutes of eight now!" finished Manuel, consulting his watch.

"Then, let us get away from here. You may be a trifle slow. If you are—"

"Come! We have not a second to lose!" interrupted the young man, clutching Jean's arm. "I hear the water in the pipe now. Another pressure will hurl it into this place!"

The companions sprung to the steps.

Manuel gained the bottom one as a rushing noise smote his ears.

It brought a cry from his throat.

"Up! up!" he cried to Jean.

A moment later the two men paused on the top step, and with scared faces looked down upon the sight below.

The taper flickering at the wall showed them the volume of water that was pouring into the cellar.

It soon ran over the entire floor and began to climb the side walls.

The waves leaped and surged about the supporters of the bier.

"You've got a new secret, Manuel," suddenly exclaimed Jean, breaking in upon the young man's thoughts. "You know that Captain Coldgrip is not yonder to be held in the water's grasp."

"What became of him?"

"Ah! that we don't know."

"But I will know! If the dead sleuth came to life, woe to us, Jean Valjen!—good-by to the million almost in our hands. Come! let the water fill the empty box. We have work to do." And Manuel rushed up the steps.

CHAPTER XXIV.

BACK FROM THE DEAD.

MANUEL had the glare of a madman in his eyes while he led the convict through the house and finally into the street beyond.

Jean looked at him more than once as if he feared that the discovery made in the cellar had turned his brain.

"Captain Coldgrip at large?" muttered Jean. "How can that be. If he was dead—; here he would stop and laugh at himself. "Of course if he was dead when they put him in the coffin he can't be at large now. What a fool I am."

Manuel did not pause until he was some distance from the mysterious place.

"Won't the water keep on running into the cellar until it floods the whole house and brings about an investigation?" suddenly asked Jean, catching the young man's arm.

"The Hoods are not fools!" was the answer. "Just enough will flow into the cellar and no more. It is full now. If the captain had remained what a bath he would have had; ha, ha! But, somehow or other, he got away in the nick of time."

At this time a pair of keen eyes were fastened on Jean and Manuel.

The two companions did not see them nor their owner, and when they separated after a bit of conversation in low tones, a man followed Manuel.

Jean was left to take care of himself as if, for the moment, he was of no value.

There was nothing striking about the night tracker at Manuel's heels.

He had a good figure, a little too broad at the shoulders to be perfection, and his step was springy and almost without noise.

Manuel went up-town.

He did not stop until he was beyond the door of Dora Van Gordon's mansion.

The tracker lost him there, and a singular smile crossed his face.

"I can't follow you any longer at present, Manuel, but I'm in no hurry, so I can wait."

And he concluded the chase by taking up a position from which he could watch the door of the building.

Manuel had two reasons for visiting Dora at that time.

In the first place, he wanted to see whether he was still "solid" with the Queen of the Hoods, and, then, he desired to know her plans against Jean, who had lately walked away from her pistol with a cool threat of what he could do.

This time Manuel was not afraid of meeting Marian, therefore no bomb would be exploded in his face.

Dora received him with a smile of eager delight.

Traces of her tilt with her husband the convict were still visible despite her attempts to hide them.

"Manuel," said Dora in the tones of a person eager to get to a certain business as soon as possible, "I had a dangerous caller to-day."

"Ah! I thought we had more than scotched the serpents that infested our path."

"All but one!" exclaimed the woman, her eyes glittering like a basilisk's. "We have overlooked the most subtly dangerous one of all."

Manuel looked at the beautiful fiend, but did not speak. He knew that Dora would come to the name of her own accord.

"You don't know him, Manuel, but I can describe him. I can tell you enough about him to put you on his track. For certain reasons I don't want to put the whole league against him just now. Too many sleuth-hounds might alarm the quarry; don't you see?"

"I want one or two keen-scented young trailers, like yourself," Dora continued. "This man who dared me in my own house to-day must be ferreted out. I want to know where he burrows."

"Is he, or has he ever been connected with Captain Coldgrip?" asked Manuel with well-assumed innocence.

"That man? never! why, he kept out of the great sleuth's sight. He would run at Captain Claude's shadow, though once he laughed at the police—once!" repeated Dora lowering her voice.

She then proceeded and gave Manuel an excellent verbal description of Jean Valjen.

It was as distinct as a photograph, and Dora, or Florette, drew it in language that seemed to cut like a knife.

The young man listened with a well-concealed feeling of merriment.

He wished that Jean could have seen his picture sketched by the woman who knew him so well.

"That is the man who came here to-day," finished the Queen of the Cobra Circle. "You have him in your mind now, haven't you?"

"I think I have," answered Manuel.

"I want him found, the sooner the better. Tell me where he lives, track him to his hiding-place and then tell me. There must be no failure. Give me this man and I will give you the most beautiful girl in New York."

Manuel's eyes got a brilliant glow.

"Ferret out this man who goes under the name

of Benjamin Belden, I say, and Marian and her wealth come to you."

"Benjamin Belden, eh? You intimate that that is not his true name."

"It is not!" cried Dora. "He had a number once."

"A number?"

"He was once in the clutches of the law!"

"Then you know something of his past?"

"I ought to," and the woman smiled. "Is it a bargain, Manuel?"

The young man almost unconsciously said, yes.

"Thank fortune! I shall get even with the serpent!" exclaimed Dora, as she caught Manuel's hand and turned the batteries of her black eyes full upon him. "I knew you would not fail me, boy. I know a true friend when I see one. You have the making of a fine sleuth in you, but I don't ask you to adopt that calling. Run down Benjamin Belden for me. It wins you a wife."

Manuel's brain appeared to whirl under the excitement of the moment.

A wild thought took possession of him.

If he could betray Jean Valjen safely, what a success he would score!

When he left Dora the new scheme was forming in his mind.

He felt the hand, the burning passionate hand, of Florette long after he had quitted the house, and had the patient watcher again on his track.

"If I keep on with Jean I may go down with him," murmured the young man. "He can't win in his fight against Florette, because the two can never become friends. The moment I am discovered to be linked to him, I lose Marian and the fortune, and gain the hatred of Florette and the vengeance of the Black Hoods. I must decide to-night. Jean may make a poor play. His visit to Dora was a poor one, but this cool lie that got him out was a magnificent performance. I can't serve both Jean and our queen and win the same prize. I must choose between Satan and the deep sea, ha, ha!"

Manuel kept on under the gas-lamps until he was in a part of the city entirely different from the one inhabited by Florette.

Despite his twistings the person at his heels had not lost sight of him.

What a persistent sleuth he was!

When he reached a certain corner Manuel noted the time and turned to the left.

A little ways from the spot he hailed a cab, got in and gave a few brief orders to the driver.

He was driven after many turnings to a well-known place, Mother Medusa's place of mystery.

The sorceress was busy at the time, and Manuel, who got into the house, waited in a small room not far from the audience parlor.

"What draws me to this woman?" he said to himself. "Why do I come here apparently without any will of my own? Do I believe in the black arts Medusa practices? Am I her dupe? By Jupiter! no. I don't take any stock in her sorcery. She is a charlatan of the deepest dye. She plays on the credulity of the thousands for money."

"Beware!" said a voice, at this moment, and Manuel left his chair and started back as if the lips of the dead had touched his ear.

Gazing up at the wall before him he saw a flaming hand, white as snow, in a crimson circle, and above it was the word he had just heard—"Beware!"

For several moments Manuel stood speechless before the apparition.

"It is some of the infernal magic that belongs to this house," he cried. "I should not let anything unnerve me here. Mother Medusa serves all her visitors thus, I presume, though I have not been treat to this before."

While he looked the hand slowly disappeared, and the wall where it had been assumed its natural color.

With the change Manuel's spirits came back to him, and the next moment he was laughing at his fright.

As Medusa did not come as he thought she would, after this display of magic he walked over to a window.

The shutter was drawn, but through the slats Manuel caught a glimmer of light.

A singular curiosity tempted the young man to place his eyes against the glass, and in a moment he was looking into a narrow corridor which he knew was the gateway between Medusa and her nearest neighbor.

Suddenly Manuel's eyes got a light they had not had before.

He saw the dark outlines of a human figure. There was no mistaking them.

In an instant the young man was gazing intently at the discovery he had made.

He could not see the entire figure, but the head and shoulders were in plain view.

"Have I been tracked?" ejaculated Manuel. "Who is the spy who has trailed me like a Claude Goldgrip? Let him turn his head, and give me a glimpse of his face."

The next second Manuel was gratified, and then, with a quick cry of horror, he threw his hand to his hip.

"Didn't the trap finish you?" he flashed.

cocking a revolver and thrusting it against the glass on a level with the man's head. "Well, if it did not, I will!"

Then he touched the trigger, and a loud report followed.

He had fired straight at Sunshine Sam's head!

CHAPTER XXV.

THE TRAIL OF THE MYSTERY.

THE shattered pane and the broken shutter told Manuel that his bullet had accomplished something.

Still gripping the smoking revolver, he leaned forward and looked down between the houses.

A wild light of vengeance and victory was in his eyes.

But Manuel saw nothing; the passage was clear.

All at once his wrist was grasped from behind and he turned to look into the face of Medusa the sorceress.

"What is it, young man?" exclaimed the woman. "You shot at something."

Manuel forced himself into a laugh.

"I did, but by Jove! my pistol must be under a spell. I missed the infernal spy at two paces."

"The spy?" echoed Medusa, looking at the broken window. "Was he not yonder?"

"He was nowhere else."

She dropped Manuel's hand and went to a near door, which led one to the passage.

"She wou't find him," muttered Manuel. "I missed the rascal. Better luck next time, Sunshine Sam, if you are flesh and blood."

Mother Medusa soon came back, and told the youth that the only visible results of his shot were to be seen in window and shutter, and the revolver was put away.

Manuel thought it somewhat curious that the sorceress did not question him about the identity of the person he had fired at.

She did not return to the subject again.

"You have been coming to my house for six months. Why do you come?" suddenly asked Medusa, leaning slightly toward Manuel as she spoke.

"I must confess I do not know," was the answer.

"In all this time you have never sought to have the future revealed. You are not a believer, young man."

Manuel did not want to tell the witch of Gotham that he was not a believer in the arts she practiced.

He got around the subject by saying that he was never curious about such things. As for the past, he knew it well enough; the future would be reached by and by—it would reveal itself.

"Let me show you a glimpse of both past and future," continued Medusa. "You are not unwilling, are you?"

"No," said Manuel, not liking to refuse, yet with no desire to witness any of the witch's mummery.

A minute afterward Jean Valjen's companion stood in the mysterious chamber.

After a brief absence behind the curtain, which, to her many dupes, hid the future of their lives, she appeared to Manuel enveloped to some extent in the perfumed smoke that seemed to rise from the serpent bracelets at her wrists.

"I see," said Medusa, in solemn tones—"I see a vessel becalmed in a tropic ocean. The sailors are idle, and not a breath of air stirs the sails. Far above the deck droops a flag which bears two white swords on a black ground—a strange flag for a vessel to float. I hear the sharp wail of a child as it comes up from below. The lounging sailors hear it, and watch the gangway with eager eyes. At last a handsome man appears above it, and the sailors spring up. The officer advances, and the men see that in his hands he carries a large silver plate, on which lies the ruddy person of a new-born child—a boy. The sailors look and salute respectfully the wailing infant, which, after a while, is carried below, while the bow-gun of the vessel breaks the silence of the sea."

"Again: I see a vessel chased by a squadron of swift sailors. I see jets of flame leap from their sides, and the thunder of sea guns comes across the water. At last the chased vessel disappears on a rocky coast, and the pursuers soon find her on fire and nearly destroyed. Above her burning deck flutters a flag with two white swords on black, and when it falls the spectators tremble the air with their cheering."

"Is that all you see?" asked Manuel, who betrayed great excitement although he labored to appear calm.

"Do you want more?"

"Go on."

"I see a young man land in a great city. I follow him to the companions he picks up one by one. He rejects all but a man whose life has been dark and dangerous. Why is this? What draws the youth to the serpent of the Old World—to the Rat who gnawed out of a trap which was to have been his home for life? Ah! if those who sailed under the strange flag had perished

with their ship, the young man would not now be tickled by the Rat's whiskers."

A cry came from Manuel's throat.

"My God! where did you get all this?" he exclaimed.

He saw Medusa smile through the smoke.

"Am I not a sorceress?" she asked. "You forget, Manuel, that I recall the past and reveal the future."

There was no reply.

"Now we will look beyond the curtain that hangs before our lives," continued Medusa, stepping forward as the smoke ceased to ascend. "Manuel, write for me on this ivory tablet the name of some person who often occupies your thoughts."

It was to be the same magic she had performed in Marian's presence when in the mystic mirror the girl saw a rushing river between two cities.

Manuel took the tablet and with the pencil attached to it wrote in bold handwriting the name of "Marian."

He might have chosen another name, but this one came first to his mind, and he wrote it down almost involuntarily.

The next moment he cast the tablet upon the brazier that stood between him and the sorceress, and Medusa went behind the curtain.

Manuel watched her closely when she came forth and held the oval mirror, so wonderful to the credulous of Gotham, in the smoke which rose from the brazier.

"Look!" she suddenly cried, holding the mirror toward Manuel. "See the future which the name of your friend brings you. You have not chosen wisely I fear, Manuel."

Filled with curiosity the young man bent forward and looked into the glass.

All at once all color fled, then he crimsoned. Medusa, ever watchful with her deep black eyes, saw it all.

"What is in the mirror?" asked the seeress.

"A prison with an open door, but it is false!" cried Manuel, and he seemed to send the words through clinched teeth.

"Beware!"

Manuel laughed, but Medusa's look checked his merriment which was assumed.

"Go on if you will defy the future," she continued. "If you will not turn from the scheme which now fires your brain—if you will follow the golden phantom that lures the foolish to destruction, do not shudder when the prophecy of the mirror finds fulfillment. The past has recalled, the future has warned. Manuel, beware!"

The last words died away in a strange intonation, and Manuel found himself alone.

Medusa the sorceress had disappeared he knew not how, and though he waited some minutes for her, she did not come.

"I can't remain here all night," suddenly cried Manuel. "I did not seek this display of magic. She brought it about with an eagerness which almost betrayed her motives. I will not believe that my game for Marian and her wealth will result in any thing like the sight I beheld in the glass. It cannot, for Dora is with me, a powerful ally, and the help of the Hoods is mine for the seeking. But Medusa did recall the past. She knows that the babe born on the vessel with the strange flag, and the young man who landed in the great city are one and the same person. I wonder if she could tell me about my mother? But I will not ask her. I've had enough of her magic for one night. I have work to do beyond this den of mystery. I want to know how Captain Coldgrip's man escaped from the iron ceiling."

Manuel walked from the room and passed into the apartment from which he had fired at the person supposed to be Sunshine Sam.

Suddenly he heard a voice.

"Beware!"

Manuel turned and looked at the wall.

Near the ceiling, in the crimson circle, as before, blazed the white hand, with one finger pointing at the word he had just heard spoken!

A sneer parted the young man's lips, and as the flaming talisman took a sudden shoot in brilliancy, he left the house.

The following second he was in the narrow way between the two buildings.

"I see where my bullet crashed through the thin slat of the shutter," said Manuel. "And by Jove! here's where it struck the house. I missed the sun lizard, or fired clean through him; which?"

Manuel passed into the street with all his senses keenly on the alert.

He kept on until he turned into Broadway, and moving up this street, he soon found himself near Captain Coldgrip's office.

"If Sunshine Sam is alive after the work of the iron ceiling, maybe the city sleuth came to life in his coffin!" exclaimed the young man. "I would give a good deal to know the true solution of the mystery. The windows of the famous little office are dark. They've been that way before when the detective was at home."

Jean Valjen's companion drew nearer to the

city shadow's old quarters until he found himself opposite the open hall which silently invited him to enter.

Manuel was strongly tempted.

He was alone and unrecognized.

Why could he not glide up the steps and listen for a moment at the door above?

"Here goes for a little play!" mentally exclaimed Manuel. "I want to solve the mystery of the empty box."

He was soon in the dark vestibule, and then he crept almost noiselessly toward the landing overhead.

Manuel had all the requisites of a good spy, cunning, a soft step, keen eyes and ears, and caution.

A few seconds brought him to the top of the stair. He saw before him the closed door of Captain Coldgrip's office.

A smile passed over Manuel's face.

He caught sight of a glimmer of light beyond the door, and then heard a slight noise that seemed to come from beyond it.

With burning eagerness the young spy leaned forward and put one eye to the keyhole.

It was a thrilling moment in Manuel's life.

All at once, and without the slightest warning, the door flew open, and the spy started back blinded for a time by a flash of light!

He went staggering toward the steps, but was suddenly arrested by a hand that fell upon his shoulder.

Then Manuel was dragged into the room and forced into a chair.

He looked up.

A man stood before him.

Manuel uttered a loud cry.

It was Captain Coldgrip!

CHAPTER XXVI.

NOT ALTOGETHER MERCILESS.

"YOU don't come around often, young man?" were the words by which Manuel was greeted when he found himself in the chair, and saw the figure of the city sleuth between him and the door.

Jean Valjen's companion seemed paralyzed by his startling reception, and for several moments he could only answer the detective with a wild stare.

A faint smile was visible at Captain Claude's lips. He appeared to be enjoying Manuel's consternation.

"Haven't you been here before during the last few days?" continued the sleuth.

"I have not," was the response.

"I presume you kept aloof because you did not expect to find me in."

"I did not think about it."

"Look here, Manuel. How goes the game?"

"What game?" and the young man admirably counterfeited a look of surprise.

"What delightful simplicity," smiled the sleuth. "The game, my dear fellow, is the two-fold one you have in hand, you and the bird from New Caledonia."

Despite his mental resolutions Manuel started.

"The girl is to be won for a wife, and a solid million raked into the coffers of the speculators," the detective went on. "When did you first meet Jean Valjen?"

"I don't know him."

Captain Coldgrip leaned toward his prisoner, whom he looked steadily in the eye.

"You need not reply if you don't want to," he said. "This is not a court, Manuel. I am in search of a little information, but you do not seem inclined to tell me how long you've known Jean. Don't try to convince me that you don't know the man, for you could never do that. I have seen you two together, and on excellent terms, too, by the way. Soon after Jean arrived in New York he met you, eh?"

"What if he did, Captain Coldgrip?" cried Manuel, assuming a boldness that only broadened the detective's smile.

"You knew each other beyond the sea."

"Who says so?"

"I do. Do you want proof, Manuel?"

"You need not be particular."

"Then I will not bother you with it. Does Dora admit that she was once Jean Valjen's wife?"

Manuel gave a slight start.

"Dora? Dora?" he repeated. "I really don't know—"

"Mrs. Van Gordon, then—the woman whom you visited this afternoon," interrupted Captain Claude. "I say, does she admit that she was once the wife of the convict?"

"I don't know."

"Oh, then she trusts you with no admissions," replied the city shadow. "You haven't got far in her graces yet. Let me get over to another subject that may possess more charms for you."

There was no response and Captain Coldgrip continued:

"You bury men before they are dead, I see."

A cry broke from Manuel's throat, and his color vanished.

"Can't you do better than that? It was the closest shave of my life, young man, and I've had more than one."

"Who helped you out?"

The question bubbled to Manuel's lips and was spoken before he could curb his tongue.

"Do you think I needed help?" laughed the detective. "It isn't very pleasant for a man to wake up and find that he has been tucked away in a box in a cellar as dark as the tombs of Egypt; not very pleasant, I say. The next time you fellows entomb a man you want to be certain that he is a proper subject for entombment. Also, Manuel, when you start an iron ceiling down upon a captive, you want to make sure that it has accomplished its object before you call him out of the way. That was a fine invention. I never heard of but one other, and that one belonged to a cruel Emperor of China centuries ago. It was singular that shortly after the descent of the ceiling, the old house should catch fire and burn to the cellar walls. Did they think to conceal by fire all traces of the infernal mechanism and its work?"

The youth shook his head.

"The prisoner of the room must have startled you when he appeared at Mother Medusa's awhile ago. You sent a bullet straight at his head, as you thought, but even at two paces you are not a reliable shot. Manuel, my young man, there are galleries in New York where novices in pistol-shooting are developed into excellent marksmen."

"By Jove! I'll give them a trial," exclaimed Manuel. "Then, Captain Claude, I may not miss the next spy who dogs me after dark."

Captain Coldgrip walked to the desk at one side of the room, and unlocked it.

A sudden thought flitted across the youth's mind.

A bound would take him to the door, and two flying leaps down-stairs would land him on the sidewalk.

But why make the attempt?

Captain Coldgrip would not leave the door unlocked, and this tribute to the detective's cunning deterred the prisoner in the chair.

In a little while the city sleuth came from the desk, and Manuel saw that he held a packet in his hand.

"We pick up odd things in our business," Captain Claude said, coolly, beginning to expose the contents of the package as he dropped into a chair in front of his prisoner. "We are continually finding missing links, now here, now there. Some come from over the sea, others we run against at our very doors."

All the time he was removing layer after layer of paper, and Manuel was watching the work of his hands with almost painful curiosity.

"See what we found some time ago," resumed the detective, at last reaching something solid. "Do you know anything about this?"

At the same time he placed in Manuel's hands the remnant of a photograph.

"My God!" exclaimed the youth, almost tumbling from his chair, and his eyes became fixed in a terrible stare on the cool, even smiling, Broadway sleuth.

"Aha! you recognize it?" said Captain Coldgrip.

Manuel's lips, white and ghastly, hung apart.

"That old photograph was taken in Seville, Spain, and on an occasion which you may be able to recall," the detective went on. "I haven't the whole picture, as you notice, but the remnant is large enough for all practical purposes. You have not changed much, Manuel. You will notice that the tattoo on the breast is quite discernible. It is said that you are the only living man who wears that mark. The story goes that it was given you when quite young by the commander of an ocean free lance, whose flag was two white swords on a background. You were not anxious to have that picture taken, but the Sevillians wanted it, you know and you were at that time in no condition to refuse."

"Curse them, no!" flashed Manuel, and his eyes seemed to catch fire at his words.

The next moment, before the detective could resume, he bent forward, and exclaimed:

"What are you going to do about it, Captain Coldgrip?"

"Then, you admit that the picture represents you?"

"Why deny what you know? Yes, I am the subject. The photograph was taken in Seville, and against my wishes; decidedly so. I may be the last wearer of the tattoo which, as you say, was placed on my flesh by command of the captain of the Winged Wolf, the last free lance of the tropic waters. He was my father. Of my mother I know nothing. I do not remember her, though I am told that I was born on board ship, and that the vessel was afterward burned to prevent her from falling into the hands of the enemy. I am in your hands. I am your prisoner; but whatever you expect of me, I am here to say that I am not a traitor."

Captain Coldgrip heard his prisoner through without attempting an interruption.

Before he spoke again he took the piece of cord from Manuel's unresisting hands and began to wrap it up again.

"Young man, I don't want your life," he said, at length. "You were born under the influence of an evil star, if there is any virtue in such things. You have felt the curse of your lineage on your father's side from the day of your birth. You had to be here to-night, but you do not have to walk down-stairs with me

when I quit this room. You must withdraw from this game for gold and vengeance. The guilty are to be punished and the secret crime of which New York knows nothing is to be brought to light. The hand of justice hovers over the heads of the guilty as the sword hangs above the spot where you took one of the most terrible oaths that ever fell from human lips."

"Great Scott! you know everything!" cried the brother of the Black Hoods.

"Not everything, Manuel," smiled the city sleuth. "You are entirely too liberal with your credits. But let me go on. You must get away from the poison of the upas tree. You must cut loose from Jean Valjen, the escaped Rat of the galley hulk, from the hooded Order of the quiet street. You must turn your back upon the queen who, under two names, lives a dual life in the heart of New York. If you do not you are lost."

Captain Coldgrip stopped, and leaning back in his chair looked at Manuel who appeared thunderstruck.

"I never knew that you spared any one," he said, smiling faintly as he spoke.

"They call you the merciless Nemesis of New York. You have been known to follow men across the continent, and to dog them from camp to camp, from trail to trail. But here, knowing me as you do, and being aware that I am wanted across the sea, you talk of setting me at liberty."

"It may seem mysterious to you, Manuel. Let it remain so. What is your decision?"

"Am I to quit New York if I follow your advice?"

"Yes, but you need not quit the country. The West is before you. You will not lack money! You will not feel the want of it. You are not friendless, Manuel. There is one whose hand would come between your shackles and the law the moment they shone in the hunter's hands."

Manuel sprung to his feet.

"Is that one the mother I have lost so long?" he exclaimed.

"Don't question me!" was the answer, and the hand of the detective encircled Manuel's wrist. "Will you go? You must choose now, and in this room. Decide between the gold game and liberty. I swear to you, Manuel, that if you cling to the guilty you will be hunted down with the rest and without mercy! The Black Hoods, Florette, and the Rat of the hulk shall fare alike. What is it?"

The detective's fingers seemed to sink into the youth's flesh like a manacle of ice.

"I will give them up for I believe it is my mother who would save me!" cried the youth, and the grip of the city sleuth relaxed.

CHAPTER XXVII.

CATCHING A TARTAR.

WHEN the figure of Manuel had left the detective's office, a door at one side of the room opened and the face of Sunshine Sam appeared.

"Do you think he'll stick to it, captain?" asked the sun lizard with a grin.

"I think he will," answered the city sleuth, slowly.

"He did not like to give the promise. He don't like to give up the big game he is into, but the fragment of the photograph, and your declaration that there was living one who cared for him fetched him around. Must I follow him?"

"Not for the present, Sam. He will have his eyes open, and I don't want him to find himself tracked so soon after quitting my office."

Sunshine Sam dropped into a chair and waited for orders.

He did not look much like a man who had been crushed by an iron ceiling, and he bore no marks of his fight for life in the old house.

We saw him last, but one time, in the narrow window trying to escape the terrible ceiling which, moved by unseen machinery, was descending with resistless force.

At the last moment the iron shutters gave way, and Sunshine Sam was precipitated to the sidewalk which he struck fortunately without injury to himself.

The ceiling had fallen, but it had not caught him, and when he picked himself up and started back a bright light flashed up beyond the window, and a moment later, it did not seem longer to Sam, the house was on fire!

As a matter of course, the sun lizard proceeded to make himself scarce in that vicinity. Overjoyed at his escape from the clutches of the Black Hoods, he resolved to be more on the alert thereafter. They should not recapture him, and he would hasten to acquaint Captain Claude with his late adventures, and help to turn the tables on the secret brotherhood.

Not far from the hour of Sunshine Sam's escape and on the same night, Captain Coldgrip was followed and struck down by a man. As the reader knows this startling event occurred shortly after the city shadow's visit to Nina, the missing maid, and when he had in his possession the diamond pin once the property of Mrs. Van Gordon.

Luck favored Sunshine Sam, and by the merest chance, not necessary to detail here, he

learned something of Captain Claude's misfortune.

When the detective came out of the death-like stupor into which the severe blow had thrown him, he found himself shut up in a narrow place strongly suggestive of a coffin. A chill of horror passed over him.

He seemed to be shut in as completely as if walled up with brick. The air was close and stifling.

He was entombed sure enough, and, what added horror to the situation, he was buried alive.

He struggled with all his might in the narrow inclosure, but he had no room in which to work his limbs.

The most terrible of deaths was before him.

The enemy had triumphed, and the career of the Broadway sleuth was at an end.

Help came when it was not expected; it reached the detective's horrible prison after he had passed into that state which is but one brief remove from death itself.

Sunshine Sam followed up a certain clew which some mysterious fortune had placed in his hands.

It led him to the cellar where the detective's coffin rested on the heavy bier waiting for the water which we have already seen surging around it like waves around a mid-ocean rock.

The fearless sun lizard of New York broke open the lid of the oblong box, and his match showed him the face of Captain Claude.

A few moments later Sam would have gazed upon the features of a dead man; but, as it was, he had come in the nick of time, and the New York sleuth was alive to pay the villains back.

Manuel had his thoughts to himself when he walked from the detective's office.

If Captain Coldgrip had raised his hand, Sunshine Sam would have been at the young man's heels, but the sleuth had other work for his pupil.

"Sam, what did you tell Miss Marian in the note you deposited in the carriage while she was consulting Mother Medusa?" inquired the detective.

"I gave her encouragement without telling her too much," was the reply. "I told her that a blow had fallen upon you, but that it was not a deadly one, and I added that things'd come out all right in the end. Did I tell her too much, captain?"

"I think not. Now, Sam, you will shadow the Brooklyn house. Manuel has promised that he will cut loose from Jean Valjen the French prison bird. I have lost the diamond pin, but I am not powerless for proof. If Manuel intends to keep his oath he will not go back to Jean; neither will he return to Florette, the Queen of the Hoods. The next twenty-four hours will decide the matter. Now to your post of duty, Sam. The best cards are in our hands, but our adversaries are cool, cunning and desperate.

Soon afterward the city shadow was the only occupant of the Broadway office, for the sun lizard was already off on the mission to which he had been assigned.

The hour was not late, and when Sam reached the bridge he had concluded to cross afoot, and not subject his disguise to the lights of the cars.

Pulling his hat over his brows, and buttoning his coat close, the sun lizard started across the bridge.

"In God's name, who was that man?" ejaculated a person who was brushed by Sam under one of the lamps.

"What man?"

"That one slipping along yonder. By Jehu! Noland, he has the step and the figure of the rat we had in the trap some time ago."

"The loafer-rat, eh?"

"Yes."

"You don't mean it. You know that the ceiling—"

"Hang the ceiling! Wasn't the front shutter found open, and after the fire what did we find under the roof—any bones? Not any, Noland. I tell you yonder they walk toward Brooklyn, under the skin of Sunshine Sam! My head for a football if they don't?"

Sunshine Sam had passed beyond the limit of the nearest light, but he was not far away.

"You know the orders, Noland?"

"Yes."

"The queen wants 'em obeyed to the letter."

"I'm in for that."

"The big sleuth is safe enough. The water is in the cellar by this time, and that clears the track so far as the captain is concerned; but I tell you yonder walks his right-hand man, and possibly his avenger."

"Great Scott! if that is true we must act!"

The following moment Sunshine Sam had two men in his wake. They were as light of step and as quick as a cat, and though the sun lizard had not forgotten Captain Claude's injunction to keep eyes and ears open, he did not hear them approach.

"Come up with him in the shadows, and, if nobody happens to be near, I'll give the signal," whispered one of the pair.

"Shall we play secret cops and walk him back to Gotham?"

"Heavens, no! A man who beat the iron

ceiling isn't to be trifled with the second time, Noland. It is but a step to the side of the bridge, and the river below has a merciless grip. You understand me now?"

"Perfectly."

"We can do the job and run for it if nobody is near. I will encircle his neck; you grip his hands and hold 'em firm."

Sunshine Sam was again in sight, and the eyes of the two men were fixed upon him.

"It is safe, everything playing into our hands," suddenly resumed one of the pair. "There isn't any person in sight just now. Follow me, Noland. Ah! here we go!"

The bound that followed the last word was more like the work of a tiger than of a human being.

The villain cleared six feet of space and all at once Sunshine Sam found a pair of arms about his neck and the weight of a man upon his shoulders.

In a flash the truth was his.

The second man, called Noland, sprung to the assistance of the first, and as he made a dive for Sam's hands, as he had been ordered to do, the sun lizard wheeled and showed prodigious strength.

"Another trap, eh?" cried Sam. "I've had enough o' sliding ceilings and such things and I don't propose to try any more. Want me, do you? Not just now, gents."

Neither of the assailants replied.

Sunshine Sam succeeded in throwing the first man off, but Noland came to the rescue and got in a blow which staggered the sun lizard for a second.

"Quick, Noland! That was a good stroke," cried the other, springing forward again. "We have a second yet. Make an end of the matter."

Captain Coldgrip's man had recovered from the stroke and was ready for the second onset.

The two villains came toward him like a brace of wild beasts acting in concert, and Sam had to meet both at once.

The next instant the three had closed, and for a little while a desperate struggle ensued.

One of the men was pushed away by the hand of Sunshine Sam which suddenly found his throat, and the other received a blow between the eyes which would have felled a bullock.

The last man pitched backward and fell at full length on the hard floor, and the sun lizard covered his companion with a cocked revolver.

"My compliments to your league, gents," said the sun lizard. "I'm a hard hoss to handle, and if I'm followed any more, I'll let gaslight into your interior mechanism. Good-night!"

Sunshine Sam dropped the weapon and turned away.

By this time a little crowd had collected, but the menace of the revolver kept it back, and the two men who had failed to finish the sleuth's spy were forced to see the prize walk coolly from their grasp.

"They haven't given me up yet," muttered Sam, as he hurried on. "Now that they know that the ceiling did not crush me, they will set some more traps. Let 'em try it! It won't be long any more, the captain says. He is ready to close in on the quarry; and within twenty-four hours, if nothing goes amiss, New York will know what killed the millionaire, Van Gordon."

And the sun lizard, dogged no longer by the night-hounds of New York, set foot in the sister city.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE SLEUTH AT WORK.

LEAVING Sunshine Sam to proceed to his post of duty, we will recross the great bridge under the gaslights, and follow Captain Coldgrip from his Broadway office to a new adventure, destined to have an important bearing on the finale of our romance.

Since his lucky escape from entombment in the unknown cellar, the famous detective had not known an idle moment.

Under a disguise which the shrewdest of the foe could not penetrate, and one that would baffle the cunning of Dora herself, he had worked with untiring zeal.

Marian Van Gordon, as yet, knew nothing of the sleuth's escape.

She had gone home from Mother Medusa's, mystified by the note which had been left in the carriage.

That message, written, as is now known, by Sunshine Sam, had not failed to give the girl some hope, but the announcement that Captain Claude had received a blow from the secret league led her to look for the worst.

Marian was still up when she heard the musical tones of the bell, and a moment later she was on the landing, awaiting with breathless interest the answer to the ring.

So many strange events had happened lately in the house, that the girl was ready to expect anything.

Dora, she knew, was not in at that moment. She had stolen silently, but not unobserved, from the house shortly after dark, and the millionaire's daughter, who had learned so much by adroit watching, was confident that she had

gone to those who were her confederates in some deeply mysterious game.

The voice at the door sent a thrill through the young girl listening at the head of the steps.

It sounded like, yet could it be, Captain Coldgrip's voice?

Marian grew into a statue on the landing.

"I don't want to see him here, yet I would give much to meet him just now," she exclaimed. "It must be the Broadway detective. Of course the man below does not recognize him."

The girl, in her eagerness, moved down several steps. The servant at the door heard her.

Turning half-way around, he looked up and caught sight of Marian.

"Miss, a gentleman here," he said, and finding herself discovered, Marian went down to the door.

She was confronted by a comparative stranger, but the next instant she dismissed the servant with a meaning glance, and leaned toward the street.

"Do you want to see me in this house?" she asked.

"I do."

"Is it important?"

"It is very important."

The girl held the door open, and the man came in.

A minute afterward he confronted Marian in the parlor, and said to her in low tones:

"I am glad Dora is away. When will she come back?"

Marian shook her head.

"Before eleven? It is ten now."

"Not before twelve, perhaps."

A smile of satisfaction came to the man's lips.

"I want to spend one hour in her boudoir," he said.

The girl started.

"I thought I would startle you," he went on. "I must be alone there, and for one hour, unless I want to be out sooner."

Marian thought deeply for a moment.

"You have never yet found me opposed to your wishes," she said. "But this request is so singular, and dangerous—"

"That you hesitate?" laughed the man who was Captain Coldgrip.

"I—do—not—know," answered Marian slowly. "Sometimes the mystery grows too deep for me, and when I think that, after all, I might be unjustly suspecting one, I tremble for the future. Captain Coldgrip, I want the dead avenged and the guilty punished, but not for the world would I injure the innocent."

"No more than would I!" was the prompt rejoinder. "My child, the next twenty-four hours tell the tale."

"So soon, then?" cried Marian, brightening.

"Soon? Has it not been long, girl?"

"A long time," with a sigh. "If you persist in the request you have made I will try to accommodate you, but the room you would visit is locked."

"That is not surprising. Let me see the door."

Dora Van Gordon's rooms were on the second floor, and Marian conducted the detective to the door which led from the library to her private chamber.

As she had intimated, the door was found to be locked, but it soon yielded to a skeleton key, and Captain Claude looked with a smile into Marian's face.

"I leave you here," she said to him. "I need not tell you that Dora's eyes see everything, and that she will observe the slightest displacement of any article when she returns."

"Her eyes will discover nothing. Trust to me," the city sleuth replied, and Marian heard the door shut and locked behind the coolest man she had ever seen.

"He did not tell me to watch, but I will be on guard," thought the girl, drawing back. "Dora may remain away until after eleven; she may return before."

As for the detective, he lit the gas in the luxurious little room and surveyed it for several moments.

On every side the appointments indicated a lavish expenditure of wealth.

The room was a marvelous creation, and the sleuth thought he knew where a good deal of the Van Gordon fortune had gone.

But he had come to the place on business and not to admire its beauties, therefore he went to work after a look which, though brief, was searching.

Near the light stood Dora's dressing-stand, its polished marble top mirroring its surroundings.

Captain Coldgrip advanced upon it and tried to open the drawers, which he found locked.

In a little while they yielded to a delicate wire which the detective manipulated like an expert, and a lot of womanish articles were displayed to his gaze.

These he touched carefully, and when any were moved, they were replaced with as much care.

The drawers of the dressing-stand yielded nothing.

Across the room stood a modern bureau, its drawers locked like all others in the room.

"The Golconda is here!" suddenly ejaculated Captain Claude, lifting from one of the drawers a jewel-box, heavy and apparently well-filled.

Carrying it near the light, he picked it open, and for a moment was dazzled by the flashes of the Van Gordon diamonds.

Reposing on their beds of rich plush, they looked just what they were—a fortune in themselves!

"This box must have a lower compartment," murmured the Broadway shadow. "Aha! here we are! Double as I thought!" and he lifted the little plush tray and discovered another lot of jewels.

All at once Captain Coldgrip uttered a cry which he found impossible to keep back.

Before him lay a magnificent diamond pin, of a most peculiar pattern.

"It came home at last!" he ejaculated.

"This is another link. I had this pin in my possession when I was knocked senseless at the mouth of the alley. Now I find it at the bottom of Dora Van Gordon's jewel-box! What does it prove? Ah! my dear Florette, you got the pin back through the men who helped to put me into the oblong box. You did not have to hunt Nina down to find it. I wonder if you looked to see if the letter from New Caledonia remained in it. It is not here now," and the secret recess in the gold setting was opened by the detective and found to be empty.

For several moments Captain Claude examined the pin and fully identified it as the one he had obtained from Nina.

"I lost nothing by coming here," he observed with a smile. "I have found the pin. Now there is but one other thing to look for."

As the jewel-box yielded nothing else, it was shut and locked, after which it was deposited in the exact spot from which it had been taken. It would take the sharpest eyes to suspect that it had ever been moved.

Besides the dressing-stand and the bureau, there were no other articles of furniture in the room which seemed to suggest a search.

Above the bureau rose a small book-case with heavy glass doors. The shelves were filled with books in elegant bindings, and Captain Coldgrip smiled when he discovered them to be, for the most part, novels of sensational life in Paris.

He wondered if those books had ever had more than a passing significance for Joel Van Gordon.

Strange to say, the detective opened the book-case and took down the books one by one. He first looked behind them, and then ran over the leaves rapidly but with a searching eye.

In the middle of the ninth book he stopped suddenly, and held the volume open. Before him lay a folded letter.

Captain Coldgrip noted the exact position of the document as well as the pages that inclosed it; then he picked it up.

The next moment he was reading the broad chirography in which it was written, and if Dora could have looked in at that moment, she would have seen that he had made an important discovery.

At the end of ten minutes the New York Vidocq was at the end of the letter.

He opened the book at the pages he had marked in his mind, and hesitated.

"If she removes the letter before I need it, it will remove a proof," he said to himself. "This is the document which Van Gordon left in his safe for Duke Tolbert, the Pittsburgher, but which was not there when Marian went to get it. It tells more than I thought it would. Shall I take it away? Can I run the risk of leaving it here? She has kept it, Heaven knows for what purpose! The very thing she should have destroyed she leaves for me to find. That is the rule. Crime always makes a mistake!"

With the last word Captain Coldgrip shut the book without replacing the letter, which found its way to his pocket, while the volume was restored to its old position on the shelf.

"This equips me!" he exclaimed, as he turned away. "The hunt is almost at an end. Now, if nothing happens, Sunshine Sam and I will score our greatest victory."

If nothing happened!

But something was to happen—something unseen and startling.

CHAPTER XXIX.

A TERRIBLE COMMISSION.

At the moment when the New York detective was locked in Dora Van Gordon's boudoir, with Marian on guard near by, the Queen of the Black Hoods was in a distant part of the city.

Marian was right when she said that Dora would not return before eleven.

The night was one set apart for a meeting of the hooded league, and in the cell or under Ladroni's house of evil reputation, the band, or nearly all of it, had come together.

It was a regular meeting night, but the members had been told to miss it not, as business of the utmost importance was to be transacted.

When the hands of the city clocks were indicating half-past ten, there was but one vacant chair in the secret lodge-room. Manuel was not there, and while the minutes flitted away Dora cast anxious glances toward the chair.

What had become of the young man?

Had he abandoned her and the league?

At length, near eleven, the door opening from the ante-room, revealed a masked figure which advanced to the chair.

Dora was satisfied. She knew the steps; Manuel had come.

"Brothers of the Black Hood," began Dora, when the conclave had been formally opened, "it has come to our ears that two dangerous foes, whom we thought to have been silenced, still live to plot against us. It behooves us to be on our guard; not only that, but it forces us to lift another, and, this time, a certain hand in self-defense. The great scheme which we expect to carry out in a short time must not be interrupted by the Broadway sleuth and his human ferret. The motto of our illustrious Order is: 'Death to spies and traitors!' and the men who seek to crush us as a brotherhood must feel the blow which spares not."

A murmur of applause trembled the masks which concealed the faces of the band, but not a word was spoken.

"We are here to draw the black balls," continued Dora. "The New York sleuth who escaped from the snare he fell into must feel the deadly vengeance of the Cobra Circle, so must the tool who, like a serpent, wriggled from beneath the iron ceiling which recorded its first failure when he got away. You know the rules of the brotherhood. The brother who draws the dark ball unscrews it in secret and executes the command concealed in it, or answers to our Circle with his life for his failure."

Are ye ready?"

"Ready!" came the response from the various chairs, but there was one mask in the assembly which was not stirred by the response.

Presently one of the members left his place and took from a secret pocket in the wall a small black box, the lid of which Dora opened with a key.

"Draw your orders, brothers, and may the hand that receives a commission fail not within the allotted time."

The open box was passed from chair to chair. When it reached him each man would put his hand into it, and take out something which he took good care to conceal from the others.

Dora watched Manuel with a good deal of anxiety in the eyes that shone behind her somber hood. Would the young man hesitate?

When the box came to Manuel he looked at the Queen of the Order and seemed to catch her eye.

Not long before, Manuel had left Captain Coldgrip's office where he had promised solemnly to give up the gold scheme and to relinquish forever all association with the evil companions to whom he had united himself.

"I will go to one more meeting," he had said to himself. "Maybe I may be able to get a mysterious warning to Dora. What a fool I was to promise the city fox who caught me! One of these days, Captain Claude, when a sharper weasel than you are has caught you, I will resume the game you want me to drop. Until then adieu."

If Manuel had known the intent of the meeting of the Black Hoods he would have remained away, and when he saw the fatal box circulating he wished he had done so.

Nerving himself to the heroic point, he put his hand into the box when it came up, and took a ball at random.

Dora let go a breath of relief; Manuel had not deserted her.

The Queen of the Hoods insisted on drawing a ball herself, and the box was carried to the raised seat, when she made her choice without looking into the fatal treasury.

"Remember," she said to the assembly, "there were two black balls in the box. They were hollow. Each ball speaks the doom of a certain enemy of our Order. The brothers who drew them will execute their commissions within forty-eight hours; the sooner the better. At the end of the time prescribed, if the work is undone, the holders of the white balls will deposit them in the box, and the commissioned brothers will answer for their failure. Let the eye be sure and the arm unfailing!"

Down came the suspended sword, as if to emphasize Dora's words, and the members saw it quivering in the floor.

A few moments later the meeting broke up, and all at once Manuel felt a hand at his wrist.

"Give me your ball," whispered a voice at his ear. "Exchange with me—quick! Let me take the risk."

He turned and looked into the burning eyes of the Hooded Queen.

Manuel drew back.

"No! I cannot do this!" he exclaimed.

"You have one of the two black balls?"

"I do not know. I have not looked."

"Then do not look, but exchange with me. I have a white one. It will make you safe."

"But you?"

"Oh, never mind me," and the woman's eyes seemed to laugh. "I am quite used to such things. Aren't you going to exchange balls?"

"No. It would not be fair," answered Manuel. "But I am sure I have not one of the fatal spheres. I never draw a prize in a lottery; my luck has been blanks."

Dora drew back, but reluctantly.

"Come to me to-morrow afternoon, at four," she said. "I have news for you. The man from the West gets here to-morrow night."

Manuel started.

"What man?" he asked.

"Ah! do you not know?—the person chosen by Joel Van Gordon to be Marian's husband. I have told you something about him before. He is the son of his early friend Duke Tolbert. I have lately discovered much about him. My husband's private papers tell the story of a pretty mystery which is really romantic. The young man has had a strange history. He has never seen Marian—"

"Then she does not love him!" interrupted Manuel.

"She adores him!" whispered Dora, with a smile. "Her father's wishes were always law to her. He comes to her to-morrow night. Don't forget. I want to see you at four in the afternoon. Remember! Good-night."

Manuel stood like a man in a maze for several minutes after Dora's departure.

The ball he had drawn from the box burned like a red-hot sphere in his pocket. He longed to look at its color, yet he did not like to inspect it in the lodge-room.

The man chosen to be Marian's husband was to appear on the scene!

Manuel bit his lips madly when he thought of him.

"Curse it all! I am under the infamous promise made to Captain Coldgrip," he exclaimed. "I am to give up my scheme for the million; I am to abandon Jean and run the risk of being followed and paid for my desertion. All this, or back I go to Spain to be tried for piracy in a court that has no mercy!"

He walked from the lodge-room like a person eager to get beyond a stifling atmosphere. In the ante-chamber he jerked off his hood and hung it on the peg where it belonged when not in use.

"For the last time, I hope!" he grated, giving the final look as he turned toward the steps up which not long before Sunshine Sam had fled before the Black Hoods.

Manuel's face was pale, almost ghastly.

He did not tarry long in the house, and when he struck the street he hastened away as if he had some one on his track.

Half an hour later he burst into a house and locked the door behind him.

"I guess I can look with safety now," he said aloud to himself. "I've put the river between me and the accursed place. Now, what did I draw—black ball or white?"

The next moment Manuel took something from his pocket, and approached the table. Leaning toward the light, he looked for a second and then uttered a loud cry:

"My God! the black ball!"

It was some time before the young man could compose himself.

"This is a fool's luck!" he went on. "Why did I go to the infamous meeting? Why did I not exchange spheres with Dora when she wanted it done?"

Manuel almost hated himself.

As he had drawn the black ball, a singular curiosity took possession of him.

He wanted to see the commission with which he had been intrusted. The grip of a giant could not have prevented him from unscrewing the ball.

The light showed Manuel that the little ivory globe was in two pieces, and a little work enabled him to turn one of them.

A few twists served to separate the two sections, and all at once a bit of paper fell out upon the table.

"The orders are here," muttered Manuel, picking up the fatal prize.

Unfolding it with fingers that shook a little, he read:

"ILLUSTRIOS BROTHER:—

"You are the chosen administrator of justice!

"Our Order is in danger.

"The spy lives and his eyes see and his tongue can speak!

"When he strikes, the brotherhood of the Black Hoods will disappear.

"To work! to work!"

"Forty-eight hours mark the limit of the enemy's life.

"If after that time Captain Claude Coldgrip lives, the vengeance of the brotherhood falls upon the coward brother!

"Beware! Remember! To work!"

Manuel's eyes seemed ready to burst from his head as he read these lines.

"This is infamous fate, sure enough!" he exclaimed. "I am pitted against the coolest man in New York. If I reject the commission, I will be hunted by a lot of men-tigers. If I accept it I may fall by the hands of the sleuth himself. I hate him, though. He forced me to take an oath I rebelled against. He wants to drive me away to make his victory easy. I know where he is. I learned a good deal of secret cunning under the flag of the crossed cutlasses. I accept the commission! Come weal or woe, Dora shall not find a drop of coward blood in me!"

And Manuel, with the last word, heard the door open, and he stood face to face with Jean Valjen, the escaped life convict.

CHAPTER XXX.

THE PAPER UNDER THE DOOR.

"WHAT was that, my boy?" exclaimed Jean with a grin when he saw the startled look which overspread Manuel's ashen face. "What was it about Dora not finding a drop o' coward blood in you? By Jehu! neither of us must show any gore o' that nature at this stage of the game."

Jean laughed at the end of his speech, but his merriment was not contagious; Manuel did not smile.

"I was not looking for you," the young man answered seriously.

"Neither was Florette when I last dropped in upon her," chuckled Jean. "Those we don't look for often turn up unexpectedly. It is the way the world wags, my boy. What is that on the table?"

Manuel looked hastily and saw one half of the little black sphere which had held the fatal prize of the Black Hood lottery.

"This? It is nothing!" cried Manuel, seizing the cap and concealing it.

Jean did not appear satisfied with the explanation, but he said nothing, and the young man thought he had allayed all suspicion by his prompt action.

"You want to work fast, Manuel," continued Jean coming forward until very little space separated him from his pard.

There was a peculiar expression on the convict's face.

"What has happened?" asked Manuel.

"Ha! don't you know? Your traps are no good," and Jean showed his teeth in a grin. "Your Hoods spoil matters when they try to catch a man on a bridge. Two of them attempted to hold Sunshine Sam awhile ago, but he slipped through their hands like an eel."

Manuel uttered a slight cry.

"He knocked one o' em half a dozen feet and covered the other in the coolest manner with a six-shooter. That man didn't fry himself in the sun for nothing. He was waiting for a sleuth like Captain Coldgrip to bring him out."

"Did you see it?" questioned Manuel eagerly.

"Only the wind-up. He was too much for the pair, and the spectators gave him a slight cheer as he walked off after tellin' the brace o' hawks that he was the most dangerous man in New York to fool with!"

"He did not see you, Jean?"

"Of course he didn't. I followed him at a respectful distance, but when he struck Brooklyn he turned to the right, and I let 'im go. I say this, Manuel: A man who can't be killed by an iron ceiling is a daisy, and Sam is nothing less than that. Are you Hoods going to let him flourish?"

"No!" cried Manuel, thinking of the other black ball that had been drawn by some member of the secret brotherhood. "If I am not mistaken, the days of the sun lizard are numbered."

"And the captain's, too?"

"And the captain's!" said Manuel as if speaking through clinched teeth.

"I could have done better myself," growled Jean.

"You missed one chance."

"When?"

"When you called at Coldgrip's office and found the old street vender in."

"I don't see how I missed it then."

"That old man was Captain Claude."

Jean the convict gave vent to a cry of incredulity.

"Impossible!" he exclaimed.

"It is the truth."

"Then, by heavens! I did miss my chance. May the furies get my head some day for it!" and his fist descended upon the table with an emphasis that made everything shake. "Don't I wish I had known it?" he went on. "I could have jumped upon him from the door and had him at my mercy in a jiffy. Curse such a mistake! I deserve to go back to the old hulk for it! But look here, Manuel, my boy?"

"Well, what is it, Captain Jean?"

"Did it ever occur to you that you could make yourself forever solid with Florette by betraying me into her hands?"

Manuel could hardly hold back a wild cry.

He had promised to hunt the convict down for Dora. His word had been given with all the solemnity of an oath. He had almost resolved to sell Jean to his worst enemy—his wife!

Did the desperate convict know that the promise had been given?

Had he been concealed in Dora's house, and had he overheard the conversation?

These mental questions sent a cold shudder to the youth's heart.

"Why don't you talk?" grinned Jean. "The idea is a brilliant one. There's money in it."

"You don't think I'd sell you out to Florette, do you?" asked Manuel with a laugh.

"No, but the idea! I want money. I want some right away. She would pay a good deal in advance for me, for you see Florette thinks she cannot succeed as she wants to while I'm in the neighborhood to play smash when I take a notion. I know too much for her comfort, Manuel. I could blast all her hopes and yours at the same time, for that matter, by opening my mouth. Jehu! how she started when I told her

that they hang people for murder in this country."

"What did you mean?"

"Let Florette answer you if she will."

"I shall not mention the matter to her."

"Of course not. Find out how badly she wants me. If she is willing to pay, say, ten thousand for her devoted husband, five thousand in advance, suck up the offer, Manuel. It'll help me prodigiously for the time. There's no risk to run, you see. You find me; you report. Florette pays over the advance stakes; the bird vanishes through no fault of yours. How well it can be worked! A superb game, Manuel!"

And Jean Valjen leaned back and laughed at his shrewd suggestion.

Meanwhile on the sloping roof just beyond the back window of the room occupied by the two men lay a human figure at full length.

The eyes were close to the lower pane, and they had in their depths a snap of triumph.

Ever since the return of Manuel from the conclave of the Black Hoods, the roof had held up the motionless figure. Not a sound had escaped the nocturnal spy.

He had seen Manuel open the hollow sphere and read the thrilling orders he had drawn by lot. He had watched the changing hues of the young man's face; in short, nothing had escaped him.

A crack in the glass before him had enabled him to hear the conversation between Jean Valjen and Manuel.

No wonder it made his eyes glow, for he was the best spy a detective ever employed. He was Sunshine Sam.

When the interview broke up and Manuel, withdrawing, left Jean alone, Sam slid from the low roof and glided away without noise.

"Something is in the wind," he muttered. "Manuel is so deep in the game that he will not obey the captain. He is playing double already. He will not quit New York according to promise. He is bound to go down with the gang. Captain Claude shall not offer him mercy again. I will take care of the young fellow. He wanted to shatter my head at Mother Medusa's, but he did not get to, ha, ha! You're a delicate fellow, Manuel; but the prettiest snakes are said to be the deadliest."

Sunshine Sam failed to pick up the youth on the street, and proceeded across the river to New York.

This time he was not molested on the bridge, and after a while he appeared at the door of the Broadway office.

The place was dark and silent, for the hour was moving on toward midnight.

The Sun Lizard opened the door with a key which he found in his pocket, and entered.

Once before he had done so, and then he had fallen into the clutches of the Black Hoods. The result of that capture was the terrible adventure with the iron ceiling, an adventure which Sam, with all his coolness, did not want to repeat.

This time he locked the door behind him.

Sam wanted a little rest.

At one side of the room stood a narrow settee. He went straight toward it and took possession.

"If the captain comes in, he'll get a bit of information," exclaimed the sun lizard. "I guess I picked up another link to-night. It was hard lying on that old roof, but the results justified it. Now let Captain Claude drop in when he wants to. He'll find me as bright as a dollar the moment he touches me."

The interior of the detective's office grew silent once more, and in a little while Sunshine Sam was fast asleep on the settee.

An hour passed away.

Suddenly Sam was aroused by a strange noise, like the scraping of a rat.

He raised himself on his elbows and listened.

"It's at the door," he whispered to himself, "but it's not at the key-hole."

The sleuth's spy slipped off his shoes and crept across the floor.

Sure enough, something was at work at the bottom of the door.

Sam got down and held his breath.

At last the noise died away; he listened intently, but it was not repeated.

The sun lizard put down his hand and felt paper. The next instant he clutched an object which he knew was not on the floor ten minutes previous.

"Somebody poked the message underneath the door," he exclaimed. "Mebbe I ought to read it, and mebbe I oughtn't."

The finale was that Sunshine Sam unfolded the paper in the dark, and struck a match.

"By glory! it's for me!" he cried, and then with dilated eyes he read the two startling sentences it contained.

"For heaven's sake, come to me when you get this. Captain Claude is dead this time for certain, and you must be his avenger."

NINA."

Sunshine Sam seemed transformed into a statue while the little match flickered in his hand.

"I don't believe a word of it!" he cried when he caught his breath. "It isn't in the deck for the whole crowd to echer Claude Coldgrip. Why, we are to finish the game up within

twenty-four hours. Nina is excited, but I will go to her at once."

The next moment Sunshine Sam had locked the office behind him, and was out on the street.

He knew where Nina lived, but he had no acquaintance with Mrs. Van Gordon's hunted maid.

He got to the alley as soon as possible, and in a moment had found the woman's door.

"Here I am!" exclaimed Sam, springing into the house as the portal opened.

"Yes; thanks!" answered a strange voice, and all at once the sleuth's spy was struck a stunning blow across the face, and he tottered, a dead weight, against the nearest wall!

At the same time a light which had been seen for a secoud went out, and then Sam felt a pair of hands at his collar.

CHAPTER XXXI.

DISCOVERY AND FAILURE.

WHOEVER had drawn the second black ball was attending to duty, for Sunshine Sam had been decoyed into the only trap likely to catch him.

If Captain Coldgrip had fallen a victim to the merciless vengeance of the Black Hoods, Dora Van Gordon's scheme to secure all the wealth of her husband, including the million bequeathed to Marian, was in a fair way to succeed.

It was late when the front door of the avenue mansion opened to admit the beautiful queen of the secret league.

The house was quiet.

Dora, just from the last conclave of the hooded sect, at which she had witnessed the drawing of the fatal lots, was in triumphant mood.

She went straight to her private chamber.

Nothing told her that Captain Claude had been there.

The deft fingers of the city sleuth knew how to put articles back in their places, and how not to leave a trail behind.

"The die was cast to-night!" ejaculated the woman. "The black balls seal the doom of the ferret and his apprentice. No iron ceilings this time; no coffins with a breathing prisoner inside. At last I have directed the blow that spares not. The men I have trained for a purpose know what is wanted. The orders are imperative, and there will be no shirking. If Manuel fails to find Jean Valjen for me, I will put a more experienced sleuth on the track. I cannot afford to let the fellow escape. His knowledge makes him dangerous. What if he should produce evidence showing that I am still his wife, and he an escaped felon from New Caledonia! Heavens! I dare not think of such a turn of the tide! Jean Valjen's retreat must be found. I want to know what amount of treasure it contains. Manuel is young and shrewd. He will not fail me. He believes that success will bring him a wife and the control of a million. I frightened him to-night when I told him that Marian's lover was coming from the West. I don't know what sort of a man he is; but no match for us; not by a long shot, ha, ha!"

and Dora, or Florrette, watched the reflection of her face in the mirror while she laughed.

A moment afterward she unlocked the bureau and inspected the contents of the jewel-box.

Her eyes appeared to get a new light as they fell upon the diamond pin in which the Broadway sleuth was so much interested.

As she turned away she glanced up at the book-case.

"What do I keep the letter for?" she exclaimed.

"He is to come to-morrow night, and it must not fall into his hands. I will get rid of it now."

She opened the book-case and took down a volume.

A moment later she was running through its leaves with a startled expression that seemed to paint her cheeks an ashen hue.

"My God! it is not here!" cried Dora, and the book dropped from her hands. "Who has entered the room? Did the Van Gordon spy invade my apartments during my absence? Woe to her if she came beyond my door! I choked her once, when she discovered me at the safe in the library. The next time, like the merciless tiger, I will kill!"

Dora looked like a mad Hecate as she stood in the gaslight, her eyes on fire and her hands tightly clinched.

"It was in the volume when I went away. It is gone now!" she went on. "It has been taken for a purpose. She was to place it in Captain Coldgrip's hands. The girl is against me. She hated me the day I became her father's wife and mistress of this house; and her hate has not abated since. Well, there's no love lost between us, Marian. You will either give up that which you have stolen, or never live to reap the fruits of your theft!"

Florette, as we can call her, for she is Florette Valjen despite her social position in Gotham, threw the glare of a tigress toward the door which led toward Marian's room.

She did not think that the carpet of her boudoir had been profaned by the tread of the New York Vidocq. It was not likely that he could attempt to penetrate to this spot.

Therefore, all her wrath fell upon the young girl only a few feet away at that moment.

The most important paper ever in her possession was missing and when she was about to destroy it by burning, thus keeping it forever from certain hands.

Why had she not dest oyed it before?

We have heard Captain Coldgrip say that crime always commits an error.

Here was Florette's. She had kept the damaging letter too long—she had hoarded it for the hands of the enemy.

Her passion found no abatement while she tried to recover from the shock produced by the startling discovery she had made.

The open and plundered book lay before, a remainder of her mistake and misfortune.

The sight increased her anger. All at once she started across the room like an enraged person advancing to the attack.

"Not to-night. I'm not cool enough for the play," murmured Florette, stopping suddenly at the door. "Let her believe for the moment that I have made no discovery. She can sleep on without feeling my fingers where they ought to be. My time will come—to-morrow perchance. She did it well, but not well enough to deceive me."

Florette went back in a calmer mood, but her intentions had met with no change.

Opening a small drawer in her elegant dressing stand she took out a gold ring with a solitaire ruby setting. Bending toward the light, she lifted the gem by means of a delicate spring, and saw in a small gold pocket a whitish powder whose tiny particles glistened.

Florette seemed satisfied with this discovery, for she shut the ring with a smile and slipped it over one of her fingers.

Half an hour later a bluish light burned in the little room, and the silence that reigned throughout the Van Gordon Mansion was broken by no sounds.

About this time and many squares from the house, a man, young and somewhat excited, walked into one of the all-night drinking dens on the Bowery, and seated himself at one of the tables.

A waiter who saw him enter was promptly at his side, and took his order.

Before the commands could be fulfilled, another person entered the place and took a seat at the same table, but on the opposite side.

The young man grew uneasy, and watched the new-comer furtively through his long black lashes like a person who wanted no other near just then.

"Excuse me. I see you have this table," suddenly exclaimed the person who had seated himself last. "You'll drink with me before I go, eh? Here, waiter!"

Manuel was eager to get shut of his companion, so he nodded assent, and the waiter filled the crder in a little time.

"You'll excuse me again, sir; but he would like to know when you are going away," resumed the stranger, as he leaned across the table and spoke in low tones.

Manuel started and changed color.

"Who wants to know?" he asked.

"The captain," was the quick answer.

"Tell him—" A smile played with the young man's lips and he stopped. "I want to know if you are Sunshine Sam."

"Not much," replied the man. "You seem to know that individual."

Manuel said nothing.

"What shall I tell the captain?"

"He knows what I told him."

"Yes, but you haven't tried to keep your promises."

At that moment Manuel thought he detected a slight change in the speaker's voice.

"Oh, well, if you don't intend to go away, the captain will run you down with the rest," continued the stranger. "You lost something a while ago," and the speaker's hand crossed the table and opened before Manuel's face.

The next second there was a singular cry, and the youth was staring at a little black ball which lay in the man's palm.

"Don't attract too much attention, Manuel," saluted him, as a hand darted forward and closed on his wrist before he could leave his seat. "When you attempt to carry out orders, why don't you succeed?"

"Great Scott! You are Captain Coldgrip himself!"

The reply was a broad smile and the increased glitter of a pair of keen black eyes.

"Within the past hour I went to my office on Broadway. It was dark. Scarcely had I shut the door when I was attacked from behind, and a heavy blow tumbled me across the settee! I was knocked senseless, for the would-be-assassin had the advantage from the first. He had been in waiting for me. I presume he left me for dead. Don't you think he did, Manuel?"

The white-faced young man knew not what to say.

"Don't you want your property?" resumed Captain Claude, glancing at the object lying in his hand.

Manuel seemed to shudder.

"Curse it, no!" he cried.

"You went back to the league to-night. You

don't intend to desert Jean Valjen, Florette and the rest. As you have attempted to play me a deadly hand, you will go with me."

"Whither?"

"Ask no questions; but come."

Manuel looked into the stern, immovable face of the detective, and got up.

The two passed out.

Captain Coldgrip conducted the young man some distance down the Bowery, and hailed the first cab he saw.

"It is to prison," flashed across Manuel's mind. "I will either go back to Spain, or be tried here for attempting to kill the Broadway sleuth. This is the end of the game for me, is it? By heavens! the touch of Jean Valjen has been contagion, and the eyes of Florette have ruined me forever! Well, let the future do its worst. I cannot escape from a man who cannot be put out of the way. There is no escape from the clutches of Claude Coldgrip."

By this time the cab was rattling over the streets of New York, and Manuel had settled back into a dark corner where he had relapsed into serious reflection.

On, on went the vehicle.

The young man, who was well acquainted with the famous localities of New York, expected to be taken to Mulberry street, and placed in the hands of the police.

He could look for nothing else.

But instead of an outcome of this kind, the cab halted at last in a more quiet thoroughfare than Mulberry, and Manuel experienced a thrill when he looked out and saw the house occupied by Medusa the sorceress.

"What does this mean?" he inwardly exclaimed.

Captain Coldgrip said nothing, but took the youth by the hand and led him up the steps.

A moment later Manuel was beyond the door of the mystic house, and the tall figure of the witch of New York rose before him.

"I turn him over to you, Medusa," remarked the detective, leading his prisoner forward. "If he is around when the hammer falls, he may be crushed," and Manuel felt a change of fingers at his wrist.

CHAPTER XXXII.

CLAWS UNDER THE VELVET.

NEXT morning, bright and early, Dora Van Gordon descended from her private apartments with a countenance that did not betray her rage and consternation of the previous night.

The closest observer would not have thought that she had been robbed of a very important document, but, for all her smiles, the mistress of the house carried a set of good claws under the velvet.

She drank her morning tea and finished her breakfast alone.

"Had we any callers last night, Rose?" she asked the maid who attended her.

The girl started the slightest and shook her head.

"Where is Miss Marian this morning?"

"She took breakfast in her room."

"Oho!" and Dora smiled as her eyes seemed to twinkle with delight.

That was all.

When she left the dining-room she returned up-stairs.

A settled expression of determination was on her face.

She walked straight to the door of Marian's room, and, as it was not locked, she turned the knob and entered with the cat-like tread so peculiar to her.

The next moment the two women stood face to face.

Florette attempted to beat emotion back by a terrible effort of the will, but Marian, quick to observe, saw that the visit heralded a storm, and tried to brace herself for its reception.

"I trust you will pardon me for not being at home when you called," began Florette, with a sarcastic smile.

"When I called?" asked Marian, innocently.

"In other words, when you robbed me!" cried Florette looking Marian in the eye.

The young girl felt a thrill sweep over her.

She knew for the first time that Captain Coldgrip had found something in the boudoir which he had taken away.

On his departure the detective had told her that he had discovered a missing link, but not one word about carrying anything off.

Florette's words, therefore, were a revelation.

"I appear to startle you," Mrs. Van Gordon went on. "I thought you would be prepared for this call. I will take my property. Will you let me have it?"

Marian drew back.

There was a light in Florette's eyes that she did not like. Once before she had seen it, and the discovery had been followed by a scene which would never leave her memory.

"I did not visit you last night," said Marian, firmly.

"Ah! do you deny it?"

Mrs. Van Gordon came toward the girl who instinctively shrank away.

"Don't give me any falsehoods, girl," she resumed. "I am here for the truth and restitution. You were in my room last night."

"I say no!"

The following second Florette's eyes seemed to burn Marian's whitened cheeks.

"No! Dare you stand before me and lie with the grass just appearing on your father's grave? Look me in the eye from where you stand and say you did not cross my threshold last night during my absence."

"I did not."

Marian spoke firmly; the occasion required firmness.

"I know your father used to boast to me that you had in your veins the blood of a woman who captured him in the mining-camps of California, and that that blood rendered you cool and level-headed on all occasions. I begin to believe it now. You were not in my room because you say you were not. You did not take anything, because you did not touch it. Is that it?"

"I only know that I did not cross your threshold," affirmed Marian.

"You dare not swear it," cried Florette eagerly.

"You will not prove me," answered Marian, suddenly lifting her hand.

Florette looked beaten, but only for a moment.

"By your Maker do you swear it, girl?" she exclaimed, seizing one of Marian's wrists. "Remember the oath is a solemn one. Dare you swear by the memory of your father that you did not invade my room last night."

"By the memory of my dearest dead!" was the answer.

Florette drew back, but her eyes were not removed from the young girl's face.

"Then, who did go to my apartments?"

Marian expected this question.

"Have I not explained enough?" she returned. "After an oath of the kind I have taken, do you want to prove me a traitor? Ah! you dare not tell me what you have lost, if anything?"

A quick start on Florette's part caused her to drop Marian's hand. The girl's arrow had gone to the center of the target.

"I will know all," Florette said. "I am going to get to the bottom of this thing. You may not have been to my room, but you know who was there. If you court open war, you shall have it, and I promise you that it shall be war to the knife!"

"I am not surprised. You like war, they tell me."

Instantly Florette flushed.

"Who is that information from?" she exclaimed. "Do you get all your cues from the man who runs his fellow-men to earth for the almighty dollar? I like the company you keep, Marian. I fancy, very much, this Broadway thief-catcher who has graduated in the school of Vidocqism. Wasn't he here last night with his velvet tread and hawk eyes? Beware whom you admit to my rooms! You know that I am not to be trifled with. You have not seen me at my best!"

Marian stood firm and heard the woman through.

"You once accused me of a crime which made my blood boil," continued Florette. "It was when I met you in the library while I was looking through the safe for something that I ought to possess. I want to tell you here that you don't want to try your tongue any more. I am not powerless because I am a woman. I can deal a blow terrible enough to stagger a giant. So, be careful, girl. Look out how you seek the Broadway shadow, and when you go to him, remember that Dora Van Gordon is his match for strength or cunning."

She walked toward the door while she uttered the last words, and turned to Marian as she touched the knob.

"Once more, remember! It is I who speak!" she ejaculated. "If you have lied to me, Heaven help you. If you admitted to my room the person who played thief last night, I will not hesitate to crush you, though you are Joel Van Gordon's child!"

Then the door opened and shut, and Marian found herself the sole occupant of the little chamber.

"Tigress all over!" were her first words. "In Heaven's name, why did my father ever mate with that woman? I believe that her hand struck him down in the dead of night; but how can we prove it? What was the message he scrawled on the piece of paper that was found in his dead grasp? Will it ever be deciphered?"

The young girl did not stir from the room until the shutting of a door below announced the departure of the Queen of the Hoods.

"Gone again!" resumed Marian. "I wonder whether she goes now? I did not betray Captain Coldgrip, but she suspects. What did he carry off?"

Marian went back to the toilet Florette had interrupted, and, a few minutes afterward, only a slight paleness told of the exciting interview.

Dora Van Gordon went down-town in a carriage, and soon appeared on middle Broadway.

Already the city was thoroughly awake, and the great artery throbbed with busy life.

"What fetches you out so early?" exclaimed a man, short of stature, as he caught sight of the Queen of the Black Hoods on Broadway.

"You look as fresh as you used to on the boulevards of Paris, but here you haven't so many admirers at your heels. I wonder if you have the five thousand for me this morning? Of course not, my angel of La Petite Roquette. You are not looking for the New Caledonian Rat."

The man who spoke thus followed Florette several blocks.

She did not look around to see whether she was followed, but kept on at a good pace until she reached an open hallway.

"Is it possible?" cried the little man, who, as the reader has suspected ere this, was our old acquaintance, Jean Valjen. "Can she be going to pay a visit to Captain Claude, the Gotham ferret? She has the assurance of Old Nick himself. But Florette ever was a cool one."

Jean did not follow his wife further than the doorway.

He went so far as to lean inside and look wistfully up the steps, but discretion whispered that he might be safer on the sidewalk than on the floor above.

Florette had disappeared.

If Jean had followed her he would have seen her halt at the little door leading into Captain Coldgrip's office. Florette was cool and self-possessed.

She rapped lightly on the door and in a moment a voice on the inside bade her enter.

Turning the knob, the cool woman opened the door and stepped forward.

The office at that hour was not deserted, and Florette was hardly across the threshold before she found herself face to face with the city sleuth.

Accustomed to surprises of every nature, Captain Coldgrip saw his visitor, but did not start.

"Have a chair, madam," he said, after Florette's greeting. "I am at a loss to know why I am indebted to you for this visit. Nothing wrong at the house, I trust?"

His manner was suave and deceiving.

This was the man she had found in her path from the inception of her game. Before her was the untiring, never-failing sleuth whom she had resolved to baffle if it took all the power and cunning of the hooded band she ruled.

He addressed her like a friend, yet Florette knew that he was trying to fasten upon her a crime terrible enough to shock the whole city.

"Something is wrong," answered the Queen of the Black Hoods as she took the chair close to the detective's desk. "I was robbed last night."

"Robbed!" echoed the New York shadow. "That is unpleasant, madam. The best of people, though, are subject to visits from the light-fingered gentry."

A faint smile came to Florette's lips, as she seemed to detect a vein of sarcasm in the sleuth's voice.

The hand she kept on her lap moved just a little.

"Yes, we must be plundered sometime," she replied. "I came hither for the purpose of reporting the robbery, and also to receive the property taken by the thief."

"When we catch the fellow, madam—"

"I have caught him! Captain Coldgrip, I will take my property or the life of the man who carried it off!"

The captain recoiled as well he might, for he was looking into a revolver held in the hand of Dora Van Gordon.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE CAPTAIN KEEPS HIS HEAD.

A SMILE intensely malicious was visible at Florette's lips.

Triumph seemed to laugh in the depths of her eyes.

Holding the six-shooter with firm grip she looked over the gleaming barrel into Captain Coldgrip's face.

The detective did not move.

"It doesn't take me long to get to the end of a trail, Captain Claude," she went on. "You are the man who invaded my house last night; you are the person who opened the book and took from it a certain document which I want returned."

The city sleuth heard her through, and returned her look with his accustomed coolness. To show a sign of timidity at that moment would be to lose the game and no one knew it better than the spotter.

"Your hunting qualities are excellent if one is to believe your story," he observed. "A man enters your house at a certain hour last night, and during your absence. He carries off, you say, an important document which he finds in a book. Bright and early this morning you start out to run the man down. He must have left a plain trail if you have found him thus soon."

Could any thing be cooler than this?

Florette looked in amazement at the New York ferret.

"Come, come! I want no parley," she suddenly exclaimed. "I have found the night

caller. Give me the booty you carried off, Captain Coldgrip. It is in the desk at your elbow, is it not?"

"You will not be denied, I see."

"Not when I know I am right!" was the instant rejoinder. "I am here to recover my property. Your work has maddened me. I intend to show my hand from now on. Dora Van Gordon is not powerless. She will not tolerate the game that is being played against her."

"Would you touch the trigger of your revolver if I should refuse to surrender the document you seek?"

"By the living God, I will!" came the answer. "Captain Claude, I know why you have shadowed me. Your trailing has been reported to me from time to time, and I have been able to keep track of you all along. Now, sir, if you will turn over the letter, the one taken from the book, I will let you alone."

The detective turned to the desk at his right.

Florette watched him with eagerness, and kept the silver-mounted revolver leveled at his head.

"The original letter, remember," said the woman. "I will have nothing else."

"I have nothing else to return," replied the detective.

Florette saw him fumble about in the desk a few moments, and then he turned to her with an envelope in his hand.

"Here, madam," he resumed, extending the envelope, which was not sealed. "You can examine the contents of this packet. If the letter inside is yours, you are welcome to it."

The woman's eyes appeared to snap with delight. She reached out a delicate hand and took the letter.

Then, for the first time, the revolver dropped.

Florette got up and stepped back, putting up the weapon as she did so.

She was only too eager to see whether the cornered detective had returned the right property.

With rapid fingers she opened the envelope, and took out a sheet of very thin paper.

"What is this you have given me?" exclaimed Florette, glancing from the paper to the Broadway sleuth, who was watching the outcome with a good deal of impatience.

"It is your property, madam. You came hither for a letter that was once in your possession. What more can you ask?"

By this time Florette had unfolded the paper, and there was not the vestige of a fleshy hue on her cheeks.

"In heaven's name, where—did—you—get—this?" she burst forth.

Captain Coldgrip laughed.

"You recognize it, then?" he asked.

"Yes, as a letter which once belonged to a friend of mine."

"Oho! I am not to be hoodwinked in this manner, madam. You know that the letter you hold in your hand you carried for years in the secret pocket of a diamond pin. It is the letter written by your husband, Jean Valjen, from the penal hulk in New Caledonia. Don't deny it to me, Florette."

The last sentence was cold and stern, and at the end of it Florette saw the New York spotter on his feet and leaning toward her.

"Do you want to know how that letter fell into my hands?" Captain Claude went on. "I can tell you the whole story, but you do not wish to hear it; I know you don't. You can destroy the letter; tear it up and trample it under your feet. It has been photographed, and the negative is where you can never put your hands on it. Is that the document you want this morning? You forgot the New Caledonia letter in which mention is made of La Petite Roquette, one of the most famous female prisons of Europe."

"What is all this to me?" suddenly exclaimed Florette. "What do I care for a letter which was written by a felon? I am Dora Van Gordon, Captain Coldgrip, and the law of libel will give me protection if I ask for it. Here! I don't want this letter. I asked awhile ago for the paper stolen from my rooms last night. This is not it."

She extended the letter toward the Broadway sleuth with the mien of an insulted person.

"Take it and give me my own. What do I care about the man you call Jean Valjen? Is he some one whom you have brought to your aid with money? I want my stolen property!"

Captain Coldgrip took the letter, but he did not return it to the desk.

"I have nothing more for you, madam," he said.

Florette's hand moved rapidly toward the folds of her dress, but the detective was too quick for her.

Darting forward like a serpent at a foe in the path, his hand caught the woman's wrist, and Florette uttered a cry when she found herself in the city ferret's grip.

"Madam, you're the coolest adventuress I ever met," he exclaimed, looking into the eyes that snapped with rage. "If you wish a suit for libel, the courts are open to you. I call you Florette Valjen, wife of Jean, the life convict. You were once sentenced to La Petite Roquette for a term of twenty years for a series of crimes

that mystified Paris. Your sex is all that saved you from the death penalty. I also call you the ex-Queen of the Order of the Hidden Hand. You escaped from prison and came to America for the purpose of again feathering your nest. What became of Jean Valjen you did not care, for you had determined to cast him off even if he should effect his escape, which was not likely.

"In the United States you played your 'hand' excellently. You saw and captured Joel Van Gordon, a millionaire on the shady side of life. A few days ago he was found dead on the floor of his private chamber. I fancy you did not shed many genuine tears, for Florette Valjen never sheds such. The will found, not in the iron safe in the library, but in the millionaire's desk, gave you one million; yet another paper, found where you never thought to look for it, tells that he recalled that bequest. Now, madam, you can open your batteries. You will find Captain Coldgrip ready for you, and for the men you have drawn around you since coming to this country. What do you say?—Florette Valjen is it?"

The woman with a mad jerk broke from the detective's clutch and drew back.

"It is a lie!—a coined and infamous falsehood!" flashed from her tongue, as she straightened at the door, and threw the looks of a beautiful fury at the man who heard her.

"You think you hold a hand strong enough to push me to the wall. I see through the scheme, Captain Coldgrip. Vengeance is mine. I will repay. Keep the proceeds of your night visit to my rooms. You will soon learn that Dora Van Gordon can deal a blow of the most terrible kind. You call me Florette Valjen; you hint at a life spent in prison. Beware! Take what comes! There was no paper found which takes back my husband's bequest. A lie of that sort will avail you nothing. You will find me ready and eager to cope with the man who pretends to be the Vidocq of New York. Until we meet again, adieu!"

Captain Claude sprung forward to detain her, but she opened the door as she gave utterance to the last word, and when he reached it she was on the steps beyond, going down.

"He's got too much in his hands!" ejaculated Dora as she touched the sidewalk. "He holds a set of cards that must be trumped before another day comes. Why doesn't the man who drew the black ball do his duty? Did it fall into the hands of a coward? Well, never mind. The days of the Broadway sleuth are numbered."

At this moment the man who had seen Florette go up to the detective's office caught sight of her again.

"I think he beat you, my seraph," he laughed in Jean Valjen's well-known tones, and the next moment he was after Florette, keeping her in sight despite the throngs of pedestrians on Broadway.

After awhile Jean increased his gait, and presently he appeared unexpectedly at the woman's side.

"Don't make a fool of yourself," he said in a cool voice as she recognized him. "The time has come for you to do something. You want help. The Broadway spotter is proving too much for you. If you don't push him aside, Florette, he'll clap the manacles on both of us. Don't you see?"

Florette looked at Jean, but gave him no answer.

"We used to work together, and we made it win, too," he went on. "I haven't lost one iota of my old Parisian cunning. By Jupiter! I believe that I'm better than I ever was. I feel that way, at least. You need help just now, Florette, and I am at your service."

She gave him another glance.

"I saw one of your old letters a while ago," she said.

"Which one?"

"The one you wrote me from the colony."

"Who has it?"

"Captain Coldgrip."

"Isn't he a shrewd one?" cried Jean. "Where did he get the letter?"

"I don't know."

"Well, I presume you are going to let him make use of it as he sees fit?" grinned the convict.

"Never!" was the answer, and the eyes of the speaker got a flash of fire.

"You're talking like Florette, now," exclaimed Jean. "I hate this man Colngrip myself. He would not hesitate to turn me over to the New York police, or to the French consul. If you don't let me help you, Florette, I will play a game all my own against him."

"Don't lose your head. I have not rejected your offer of aid," answered Florette. "I think we can work together as of old. Come to me at this place at seven o'clock to-night," and she slipped Jean a card. "Good-morning."

"A windfall for a thousand!" exclaimed the convict, looking after her as she moved away.

"She's given me a grip that only death can loosen!"

from her. By Jove! whoever sprung the trap knew the only bait that would catch me. Is the captain again in the clutches of the enemy? I don't believe a word of it. The whole thing was a snare for me."

Need we say after this that we have come back to Sunshine Sam?

We left him last in the house of Nina, the maid. The message slipped under Captain Coldgrip's door while he (Sam) was taking a sleep on the settee, had succeeded in drawing him to the spot where he had been felled by a stunning blow across the face.

If the person who had worked this startling "racket" on the sun lizard was the person who had drawn the second black ball at the last meeting of the Hoods, he had succeeded better with his victim than Manuel had with the detective.

Sunshine Sam could not believe that Nina had assisted in the decoy.

He knew that the woman had committed a crime which had put her under ban, but Captain Claude seemed to trust her, and, on this account, Sam did not think her in league with the enemy.

When the detective's spy came to his senses after the blow, he found himself in a dark place which turned out to be a room without the semblance of a window, and with but one door that was tightly shut, and devoid of any thing in the shape of knob or latch.

Sam's first thought was of an infernal contrivance, for his terrible experience with the mystic ceiling was still fresh in his mind.

"I wonder if they did make two of a kind," flashed through his mind. "My face feels like it had received a side wipe from the trunk of an elephant, but I'm thankful it is no worse. Now how am I to get out? If Nina still inhabits the house, that is, if I'm an inmate of the place, I'll hear from her in some shape. She's got a boy, a shrewd fellow named Jess, whom Captain Claude thinks of training for a detective. Where was he while they were putting up on me the job that would have caught the oldest rat? Was the boy in the mix?"

Sunshine Sam could not tell whether the hour was night, morning or mid-day. His room was as dark as a dungeon under the Styx, and, in this respect, was worse than the prison of the iron ceiling, for a little light had crept into it by the window.

Sam had been searched carefully after the blow. He knew this by finding certain things which he carried on his person in the wrong places, but nothing was missing but his knife and revolver.

He could not get over the fact that he had been cooped, and that just when he had some important news for Captain Coldgrip.

He had just witnessed the interview between Manuel and Jean Valjen, he had heard their conversation by lying on the sloping roof, and it had given him a link in the chain of evidence that the city sleuth was forging for the Queen of the Black Hoods.

To walk around his prison and feel nothing but bare walls was maddening torture to the sun lizard.

Several times he threw himself against the door, but it had resisted like portals of iron.

Several hours seemed to pass away after Sam's return to consciousness.

He had a burning thirst, and his face was full of darting needles of pain.

"By Jehu! if I only could find out how much time has elapsed since the trap was sprung, I'd feel better," muttered Sam. "I feel like I've been here a week. As usual, they took me in without giving the captain an inkling of the matter. I'm supremely disgusted, and ready to chew up the enemy at the first opportunity."

Suddenly there came to Sam's ears a sound that startled him. Any sound was liable to do this for he had heard nothing since returning to consciousness, but the noise had a peculiar spell for him.

It was not at the door, for Sam was there when he heard it.

It seemed to come up through the floor in one corner of the dark room, and crawling to the spot with all the caution he could, the detective-spy proceeded to listen.

Sure enough his ears had not deceived him.

He heard a sound like the gnawing of a rat underneath the boards.

"It'll take you as long to get in here, old fellow, as it will me to get out," observed Sam, quietly, while he listened to the scraping. "Great Scott! I wish you had a file and a saw in your kit o' gnawing tools. You'd do Sunshine Sam a favor, and besides help the cause o' justice on the outside of this trap wherever it is."

The rat-like gnawing continued without intermission.

All at once Sam jerked back with a cry.

"Jehosaphat! what was that?" he exclaimed. "Something ran into my hand. Jove! there is blood on it already. A rat don't shove its teeth up through plank."

For a moment the sounds ceased, then they were resumed, but plainer than before.

"Somebody's under me!" suddenly exclaimed

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A RAT WITH STEEL TEETH.

"I WONDER if Nina had a hand in this? The message that lured me here purported to come

Sam. "Mebbe he's a prisoner like myself. Shall I try him?" And the sun lizard bent down until his lips almost touched the floor.

"Hello!"

Sam waited with his heart in his throat as it were. The gnawing-like noise ceased, and a short silence followed.

"Are you there?" asked a voice from below.

"I'm nowhere else," answered Sam.

"I thought you were, all along, but I was afraid I might be mistaken."

"Who are you?"

"Jess."

"Nina's boy?"

"Yes."

"You're worth your weight in gold. Where am I?"

"In a house on the west side."

"Not in your mother's house, then?"

"No."

"Say, Jess, how long has it been since they trapped me?"

"It's nigh noon of the day after."

"Not longer than that! Great Cæsar! it has seemed an age to me."

"And nearly that long to me, too," answered the boy. "I have to come at you by the cellar."

"Why not by the door?"

"It's been walled up!"

A momentary chill swept to Sunshine Sam's heart.

"It is worse than the iron ceiling!" he exclaimed.

"I'm in the old cellar under the trap. Mother went away very mysteriously. I don't know what's become of her. Two men came to our house and nabbed me. They wore masks that looked like the natural skin, but I knew 'em—Diamond Dust and Light Finger! I got out o' their clutches, but too late to spoil the game they set up on you. But I've enlisted for the war, Sunshine, and if I don't live to show the two dandy rascals that Jess is on top, may I never see mother any more. Now, I'll saw a hole out in the floor, a hole big enough to let you down here, for you can't get out o' the trap only by this cellar."

"Go to work, Jess!" exclaimed Sam. "If you ain't a friend in need you may serve me for roast pig."

Forthwith the saw which had penetrated Sam's hand with its sharp point, went to work again, and the noise it made was the sweetest music that had ever struck the spy's ears.

Jess in the cellar worked industriously, and the movements of the saw told Sam that he was doing good work.

"Here we are!" suddenly exclaimed the boy taking out the piece of flooring he had sawed off. "Now you can drop through, Sunshine Sam, and the future will take care of itself."

"If it doesn't, I'm a Tartar!" exclaimed the delighted shadow, as he began to force his body down through the opening. "I'm like a weasel for squeezing through little places. If there'd been a key-hole hereabouts I'd have been out long ago! By golly! I would, ha, ha!"

It did not take the sun lizard long to join his liberator in the cellar.

"We'll see how the coast is," said Jess. "Of course you don't want to run against any hooks in getting away."

Sam remained in the dark cellar until the boy had made a reconnaissance, after which he reported that they could leave it without much fear of discovery.

The cellar opened into a back yard inclosed by a close fence.

Exit was made without incident, and the pair were soon on the street.

"In fortune's name, how did you ever find me?" eagerly questioned Sam.

The boy looked up with a cunning smile.

"I guess I smelled you out," he said, with a mischievous wink. "Won't you let it go at this, Sunshine?"

"Certainly, because I'm out o' the trap," laughed the sun lizard.

"I've done you a favor," continued Jess. "Now lend me a hand."

"What is it, boy?"

"Help me find my mother."

"You don't have to ask me twice," was the prompt reply. "I'm at your service, Jess; but first I want to report to Captain Claude. Have you no clew at all to your mother's whereabouts?"

Jess sorrowfully shook his head.

Sunshine Sam pitied the boy.

He was as bright as a dollar, with a good physique, and a pair of animated black eyes.

"He's got what the captain calls 'good stuff' in him," mentally exclaimed Sam, looking down at the boy. "This chap finds his mother for a hundred, or I'll know why not!"

Then he continued, while they walked along:

"Tell me all you know. Give me your impressions, boy, for you're old enough to have 'em."

Jess was not slow to obey, and while they walked toward Broadway, he told all he knew about his mother's disappearance, as well as his knowledge of the two men whom he called Light-Finger and Diamond Dust.

Sunshine Sam saw the motive which had led

to Nina's absence. She had been put out of the way to render certain of success the game against him.

"Look yonder!" suddenly whispered the boy, as they were crossing one of the public squares, and his hand caught the sun lizard's wrist. "The man straight ahead, in cross-barred pantaloons is eying us like a hawk."

Sunshine Sam looked once and saw Jean Valjen.

"I'm going to out-flank the gentleman, Jess," said the detective spy. "Watch me come a game on him. He is one of the fellows we've got to catch before to-morrow, and I'll just nab him now."

Sam started toward the life convict as if he did not see him, and Jean appeared to think such was the truth, but not for long.

All at once the sun lizard caught the rascal's eye.

Jean started.

"Hold on, Monsieur Jean!" called Sam.

"Not for you, sleuth of a sleuth!" was the reply, and the New Caledonian fox took to his heels and bounded away with the speed of a champion sprinter.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE VANISHED WITCH.

SUNSHINE SAM looked at Jean as he ran, but made no attempt to follow.

"Let him go," he said as, with a laugh, he came back to the boy Jess, who had watched his failure to capture the felon. "We will get the fellow at the close of the game."

"I don't know about that, Sunshine," answered Jess, with a shake of the head. "He runs like a deer, and his short legs carry him well."

Not long afterward the sun lizard of New York was relating his adventures to Captain Claude in the little Broadway office, and the outside world was none the wiser for it.

As for Jean, he kept on until he discovered that Sam had not pursued. Then he paused, well blown and elated over his success.

"I can't afford to be pulled up now with the splendid outlook ahead," he exclaimed. "I've got in with Florette again, and the grip I will soon have on the purse that holds a million will never be shaken off. I wonder what's become of Manuel? I don't care now whether he keeps in the game or not, but he will be useful if he can become the husband of Van Gordon's daughter. It'll be another string for me to pull!"

Jean went to Mother Medusa's house and rung the bell.

For once the mystic doors did not open to him, and he rung again with much vehemence.

Still, there was no reply.

"By Jupiter! she doesn't want to cut me. She can't afford to!" grated the life-convict, and he looked madly at the house whose shutters were drawn, giving it a deserted look.

He waited a few moments longer.

All at once he left the front steps, and plunged into the passage between Medusa's house and its nearest neighbor.

There's more than one way to get into a cocoanut," laughed Jean.

He reached the rear door and found it locked.

A series of knocks brought no response.

At last in despair Jean fished a lot of keys from his pocket, and tried them one by one.

One of them entered the lock, and the door opened.

"She cannot be at home, but, by Jove! I don't like this silence," muttered the fellow.

Beyond the threshold he heard no sounds save those he made himself.

He passed from room to room without being met by any one, and came at last to the door of the chamber of magic.

Jean, on certain occasions, was as bold as a lion.

Wrenching the knob, he jerked open the door and entered.

Silence and semi-gloom, nothing more.

In the middle of the room stood the wonderful brazier, but no smoke rose above its polished sides.

"Hello!" cried Jean, "the veil of the future is torn down!"

Sure enough, the curtain behind which Medusa retired at times was no longer in its place, but lay in a heap on the floor, as if it had been jerked from its fastenings, and thrown there.

"A thousand to one that Medusa is gone!" ejaculated the fellow, as he stepped forward and gazed at the few objects which the curtain had concealed from the credulous.

He did not know that Manuel had fallen into the hands of Captain Coldgrip, by whom he had been taken in a carriage to Medusa and turned over to her.

Jean was astonished by the scene upon which he looked.

What could have taken Medusa away? She was doing a magnificent business; her dupes were numerous, and she was coining money through their desire to know the future.

"There's some mystery here," observed the felon. "Maybe it's under this curtain."

He stooped and plucked the curtain away.

"Ah! here it is—just as I thought!" he exclaimed.

On the floor lay an envelope, addressed, "To the curious," and in a moment it was in Jean's hands.

Bearing it to a ray of light that struggled into the room at the window, he opened it; it was not sealed, and read:

"To the person who picks up the fallen vail:—The reign of Queen Medusa is over! She has found her own, and the realm of magic will know her no more. A thousand thanks to all who poured their money into her coffers. This country is full of dupes who pay their gold to hear something pleasing though it be a clever magician's lie. I came to New York to find the lost, and the lost has been found. Henceforth those who knock at my doors will knock in vain. Adieu! The money of fools becomes the fortune of their deceiver."

"MEDUSA."

We need not say that the eyes of Jean Valjen dilated while he perused the lines left by the New York witch.

"Whom does she mean by the lost?" he cried. "I thought I knew Medusa pretty well, not in this city, but in Paris, but she kept one secret to herself. Well, let her go. The fools of New York will go to other wizards, and some one will fill Medusa's place before the month is out."

Jean turned back and left the house.

As he emerged from the passageway, a carriage drove up and a woman richly dressed mounted the steps.

"The gilded fools are arriving," laughed the felon. "They can ring their nerves out for aught I care," and leaving Medusa's patron to jerk the bell to her heart's content he turned his back on the house of magic forever.

The day that crept on was a long one to the life convict.

He had an engagement with Florette at seven, and he hardly knew how to put in the time till then.

One thing he took good care to do, and that was to keep away from the vicinity of Captain Coldgrip's office.

He crossed the river to the old rendezvous in Brooklyn and waited several hours for Manuel, but the youth did not turn up.

The place designated by Florette for the interview was not her own house, but a quiet spot in the heart of the city, and when seven had been almost reached, he repaired thither.

The Queen of the Black Hoods was already there.

"Are you ready for a bold and deadly play?" asked the woman, leaning eagerly toward Jean.

"When was I not?" he replied.

Florette shook her head.

"We must finish with this man Coldgrip," she went on.

"And with his spy as well, I think," said Jean.

"Ah! no need of that. The spy is fixed," smiled Florette.

"Since when?"

"Sihce last night."

"Then the trap was a desperate poor one. I saw the sun lizard at noon."

Florette gave vent to a quick cry.

"I saw him at large," the felon went on.

"What kind o' traps do you set in New York?"

"Not the kind you used to operate in Paris."

"They are intended to be deadly ones. But I have too many to trust."

"Too big an Order, eh?" grinned Jean.

"Never mind about the Order. If Sunshine Sam is at large there is one more enemy to crush; that is all. But we will begin with the king of sleuths. I won't trust my people any longer. I have depended on the arms of cowards. We will deal the fatal blow, Jean. We will brush from our path forever the man who possesses the persistence of the sleuth-hound."

"What is the stroke?"

Without replying, Florette took a small packet and opened it before Jean.

The life convict, with eyes full of eagerness, leaned forward, and looked at a lot of whitish crystals which had been exposed to view.

Florette's eyes glittered.

"The world advances!" she suddenly exclaimed, looking up with a smile into Jean's face, and then she ran her white hand over the little salt-like crystals that seemed to glisten anew as they were turned.

"What are they?" asked Jean.

"The product of science and invention!" she said. "These little particles have the power of a score of giants. I sprinkle them on the carpet, you step on them, and the papers to-morrow will have an article headed, 'A Mysterious Death!'"

Jean involuntarily drew back.

"Mon Dieu! they explode!" he cried.

"No, Jean. For once you have shot wide of the mark. They do their work as secretly as the most mysterious agents of death. I have not been idle since quitting our beloved Paris. I have armed myself as woman has never been armed; but I have saved my secret agent till the last. I wrap up the packet. You know where the enemy is. At some time to-night Captain Coldgrip will not be in his office, but he will be there between now and to-morrow. These crystals, sprinkled on the floor between the door and his desk, will silence the

New York Javert, and do it effectually. There is no risk, and the authorities can find out nothing."

She put the packet into Jean's hands as she finished.

"After this stroke, wealth and power," she continued. "Don't you want to gain them? Well, hand me back my silent destroyer."

The convict kept the little packet away from her hand.

"I can do it. I thought you wanted to help me, but I discover that you like to have the cool-blooded sleuth at your heel," she laughed sarcastically. "The hulks of New Caledonia clipped your wings, I see. I feared as much."

"It is false! I fear no man and shrink from nothing."

"Prove it!" cried Florette, looking at him. "Come to me to-morrow at ten, and say that you are still the man I used to know beyond the sea."

"I will be there!"

Half an hour later, Mrs. Van Gordon stood in front of her elegant mirror and surveyed her beautiful face.

All at once she heard a carriage stop in front of the house, and then the bell rung.

A few moments later she was on the landing, leaning breathless over the balustrade.

"It is he—at last!" she exclaimed. "The lover from the Far West has come, and Marian will be happy now for a spell. What is he like? Ah! he is handsome, with features like his father, Duke Tolbert. Oh, well, let him come! He will witness my final success, and if he takes Marian's advice and opposes me, by the eternal stars! he will feel the hand of the Queen of the Cobra Circle!"

Florette waited to see no more, for the visitor had entered the famous parlor on the left, where Marian was waiting to receive the man she already loved.

"Jean will do his duty," ejaculated the cool beauty once more before the glass. "The man dare not fail me now."

At that very moment a figure crept up the steps leading to Captain Coldgrip's office, and a package was clutched tightly in its right hand.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

JEAN AND HIS DIAMOND.

"By Jove! I never expected to be put to this kind of work, but it binds me to her and her to me. Don't I know of another occasion when the white crystals were used? There is no doubt of it, and Captain Coldgrip with all his cunning has not found it out. I don't care a continental for Manuel now. Let the boy go. I am master of the situation, for Florette is in my clutches again!"

Thus murmured the man who slipped up the stair toward the city sleuth's Broadway office. He made no more noise than a cat would have made, and no one saw him lean toward the detective's door.

The office was vacant, and though the door was locked the man did not remain long on the outside.

Beyond the threshold the room was almost dark, but the shrewd prowler saw the ferret's desk, and the floor about it.

His eyes got a malicious glitter as he began to open the pocket he carried in his hand. He had a good supply of the mysterious crystals Florette had given to Jean a short time before.

He took them out of the paper and scattered them over the floor between desk and door. When they fell they seemed to disappear like rain-drops falling on water.

"That will do," muttered the man again. "By Jupiter! I'd like to witness the results of this work."

He saved a few of the crystals by putting them back in his pocket.

"I don't know how soon I may need them myself," he said with a smile.

Then he caught sight of a small box on top of the desk, and the next moment he had his hands on it.

It was empty. "I guess I'd better leave. Good-by Captain Claude. The trap I quit fully set will surely catch the sleepless Nemesis. I never thought of this in New Caledonia, and I'm sure that Florette knew nothing of the crystals in Paris."

He turned toward the door, but in doing so stepped where he had thrown the deadly chemical.

The empty box on the desk had drawn him further than he had intended to go.

The next moment something seemed to dissolve under his feet!

He started back with a strange cry.

There was no explosion, but a whitish flame was spreading over the floor.

"My God! the trap intended for the Broadway sleuth will catch me if I do not hurry!" passed like a flash through his mind.

Already an indescribable odor was beginning to fill the room.

He went toward the door, his brain already in a whirl, and his limbs tottering like a child's.

"The door! the door! In heaven's name where is it?" he exclaimed.

The white impalpable flame on the floor danced like Jack-o'-lanterns about his feet. The deadly odors grew denser; the contents of the room swam around!

A wild fury seized him as he touched the door.

He caught the knob and tried to turn it, but power to do anything seemed to have left his frame.

"She knew this would happen!" he cried. "She foresaw this awful result. A thousand curses on the head of the tigress of La Roquette!"

He staggered back across the floor and fell like a person suffocated at the foot of the detective's desk.

The flames disappeared and the room was dark again.

"I'll leave enough to destroy her!" hissed the man writhing on the floor. "Give—me—a—minute—thirty seconds!"

He seemed to get new strength for a moment. He dragged himself to the window, and lifted his body by the sill.

This work was by a powerful effort. It was the last supreme one of a man in the throes of death.

Scratch, scratch, scratch, went something across the pane!"

He had to hold himself up to the work by a deathlike clutch on the sill while he made the singular noise.

"There!" he grated, falling back. "It—is—a—barren—victory—woman! After all, I hold the hand that wins!"

The next moment the figure of a man lay on the floor, and the room was as still as if the silence of the grave had taken up its abode there.

Every strange odor had disappeared, and where the ghastly flame had danced over the floor there was not the sign of a burn.

Nobody came to see the effect of the deadly crystals.

Captain Claude did not look in to find on the floor of his sanctum the man hunted by the police of two continents—Jean Valjen the life convict of felon land!

About the time of the occurrence of this startling scene two men appeared at the door of a certain house on a street which might be called quiet.

They were admitted by a man who recognized one of them, for he gave a short exclamation, and his look became one of wonder.

"I'm back to try the rat-hole again, Ballard," smiled the individual who had been recognized.

"I thought you had enough of it before."

"Not quite, although I did get away by the skin of my teeth. Come, captain. I guess you can squeeze through."

In a little while the two men, who were Captain Coldgrip and Sunshine Sam, crept through a certain hole near the floor, and by this means entered the infamous old house known as Ladroni's.

The old Italian was surprised on the second floor and bound before he could give any alarm, and Sam led the city sleuth to the scene of one of his thrilling adventures, the secret chamber of the Black Hoods.

The sword swung from the ceiling, and the chairs arranged after the manner of a crescent were empty and somber-looking.

The room was submitted to a thorough search, and the keen eyes of the New York ferret glistered more than once while it was in progress.

"I've got enough—enough to solve half a dozen late mysteries," he exclaimed, turning suddenly upon his companion. "I see the work of the men whom Florette has drawn around her. They are responsible for the remarkable series of burglaries which of late have baffled the police. She has been working the same game that made her famous in Paris. While she was the wife of the millionaire Van Gordon, she has been Queen of the Black Hoods. I think I have picked up all the links. The chain is complete."

"What about the mystery of the millionaire's death, captain?"

"She will be confronted with that when the time comes," was the reply. "She knows nothing about the paper found in the millionaire's dead hand—the paper with the horrid scrawl across it. I hold the letter intended for Duke Tolbert, the Pittsburgher, and the letter which she held back by some strange fatality, failed to destroy. Yes, Sunshine Sam, I guess we've got all the links. To-morrow you can hunt for Jess's mother."

A few minutes later Captain Coldgrip and his spy went back through the rat-hole, but they were not alone.

Old Ladroni, the Italian, was their company, and when he was told that he had fallen into the hands of the Broadway sleuth of whom he had heard, he wanted to tell all he knew about the secret brotherhood.

He was not listened to by the two men who were forced to smile at his eagerness, but the lock of a station-house cell clicked on his ears, and he began to fear that a rope would ere long lengthen his shallow neck.

"A few moments at the office, and then for the little Rat from felon land," remarked Captain Coldgrip, as he and Sam turned into Broadway after landing old Ladroni at the station. "I am anxious to know how Medusa got along with Manuel; but we will know in time. The youth would be in the net with all the other fish if the sorceress had not stepped forward."

Sam looked curiously into Captain Coldgrip's face.

"What made you take a fancy to the young pirate?" he exclaimed.

"Oh! can't you guess, Sam?" laughed the detective. "Medusa, the witch, has been looking for a long lost son—a boy who was born under a flag of crossed cutlasses."

"Then she has found him!" ejaculated the sun lizard.

There was no reply, and no change of countenance told Sam that his arrow had gone to the truth.

A short time later the two men appeared at the office on the second floor of middle Broadway.

"A light," said the detective.

The following moment the appointments of the room were revealed, and then a startling exclamation burst from Sunshine Sam's throat.

He started back with a face suddenly grown white, and pointed at the figure lying on the floor under the window.

The position indicated death.

"It is the Rat himself!" exclaimed Captain Coldgrip with one look, and then he confronted the terrified Sam with a smile at his lips.

"Death ran this fellow down for us; but what was he doing here when the blow fell?"

Under one of Valjen's hands, and still faintly held by the cold fingers, glittered a ring with a sharp diamond setting.

Captain Coldgrip picked it up and turned it to the light.

"It is a diamond that cuts," he said.

"And it has cut! Look at the window!" exclaimed Sunshine Sam, starting forward. "By Jericho! this beats the millionaire's death message."

The New York detective left the dead man and began to study the scratches on the glass.

"Is it in French?" asked Sam, remembering Jean's past life.

"No. I have it now," was the answer, and then Captain Coldgrip, with his eyes riveted on the tell-tale pane, read the felon's last effort:

"Dora is Florette—the—crystals—pocket—kill! Run—her—down—down—
"JEAN VAL—."

The weakening hand had left the task in the middle of the name its owner had rendered infamous.

"It is enough," remarked the detective. "The message confirms the one found in Joel Van Gordon's private room. What more could we ask for?"

"Nothing. The chain seems to have all its links," and Sunshine Sam gazed curiously at the white crystals which had been taken from the dead man's pocket.

Then a clock not far away struck in solemn tones the hour of twelve.

"The trail is ended," exclaimed Sam.

"Not till we have the coolest woman in New York in our grip. I intend to close the work where it was begun—in Dora Van Gordon's parlors," replied the man of many victories. "Until then the trail is unfinished."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

HUNTED DOWN.

If there was an over-anxious woman in New York the next morning it was Florette, or Dora.

What had transpired at the office of the Broadway spotter?

Had Jean carried out his part of the play, and had she finally brushed from her path the man who had wove about her a network of damaging proof?

Florette was anxious.

The son of her husband's friend had come from the West, and, although Marian now met him for the first time, she loved him.

Manuel was missing, and Florette was ready to charge him with treachery, cowardice, or what not.

She breakfasted alone, but devoted more time to the morning meal than usual.

There was nothing startling in its columns.

She looked them over carefully for the name of Captain Coldgrip, but it did not catch her eye.

The morning advanced and the hour for Jean's report approached.

Would he come?

Suddenly Florette, in her private rooms, was startled by the musical sounds of the bell in the lower hall.

She looked at her watch. It lacked twenty minutes of ten, but perhaps Jean, eager to report, was a little ahead of time.

After a while a light rap sounded at her door.

"Madam, a gentleman in the parlor," said the housemaid.

Florette's eyes got a sudden look of victory. Jean had come!

The next moment she flew lightly down the stairs, and into the semi-darkened parlor.

A man in a chair caught her eyes as she crossed the threshold.

She went toward him boldly.

"Your promptness betokens good news!" she exclaimed, and then the visitor left the chair and stood before her.

A moment later a singular cry sounded in the room, and then Florette, with staring eyes and face suddenly white, stood before the Broadway detective.

The wrong man had come.

It was as if the dead and not the living stood before her.

"Madam, I trust you will excuse me," said Captain Claude suavely as he bowed. "My call is early, but the business is important. I had a visitor last night, an old friend of yours. He called when I was not at home, but he remained till I came back. He is there yet."

The woman looked amazed; but in an instant she seemed to regain her accustomed coolness.

"You need not speak in riddles, Captain Coldgrip," she exclaimed.

"Very well. Jean Valjen lies dead in my office. He was a corpse when we found him. Like a man who died not long ago in this house, he fought death off until he could leave behind a message for the living. Jean wrote on the window with his diamond ring, but Joel Van Gordon left his last words in a hideous pencil scrawl."

There was no answer.

Florette watched the detective with the eye of a hawk. She scarcely seemed to breathe.

"Jean kept a part of the white powder. It throws out a strange odor while it burns," the city sleuth went on. "It is the same deadly chemical which was crushed by the feet of your husband. The paper found in his dead hand contained the words, 'My convict wife did this! The white crystals I saw in her room looked like death. Avenge me, Captain Claude.'"

The New York detective leaned toward Florette while he spoke, and caught the cold glare of her eyes.

"Well, what is to follow?" she asked.

"An arrest for murder," was the answer. "You are to be arrested for the murder of Joel Van Gordon by means of the chemical that killed your convict husband."

"When?"

"Now. I am here for that purpose."

"I thought you would follow me for a purpose," suddenly laughed the woman, as she drew back a little. "How much do you want, Captain Coldgrip?"

The detective smiled.

"Nothing?" continued Florette. "Have you no price? I've bought scores of your kind off. They are cheap where I came from. Well, you've played a persistent game, but there's nothing in it. I know nothing about the white powder you hint at. There was no paper found in my husband's hand. All this is a part of your blackmailing play. I denounce the accusation, and you will find in me one woman who will not yield to the threats of a city ferret!"

What could be cooler than this?

Captain Coldgrip, in all his experience, had seen nothing to compare to it.

"I will show you proof that destroys the meshes of your weaving," Florette suddenly went on. "I have been waiting for the fall of your best card. You have exposed your hand, leaving me trumps enough to make you the laughing-stock of New York. I'll show you evidence which shatters your work. Wait for me here."

Before Captain Claude could detain the woman, she was beyond his reach and gone. He heard her a moment on the stair and then the sounds of her footsteps vanished.

"She does not mean what she says," he exclaimed. "The Dora of New York has gone back to the old Florette of Paris. She must not elude me after this long chase!"

The next moment the city shadow was in the hall beyond the parlor; then he was on the stair.

At the head of the steps Marian met him, and sprang forward, clutching his arm as she gasped:

"Don't—follow—her! She means more than you think."

"Let me go," and Captain Coldgrip drew himself from the girl's grasp. "It is the end of the trail, and the quarry must not escape."

He went toward Florette's apartments and tried the door. It was locked, and no sound came from beyond it in response to his attempt.

Not far away, breathless and white-faced, the millionaire's daughter stood with clasped hands.

The detective turned upon her.

"Your key, Marian—quick!" he cried.

The terrified girl did not reply.

"Very well. I think I am equal to the emergency," said Captain Coldgrip, looking at the door as he drew back a step.

The next moment he launched himself against the portal with the fury of a battering-ram.

The door quivered, cracked and fell in.

Marian uttered a cry as the detective sprung across the threshold.

Captain Claude was greeted by a nameless odor which seemed to fill his lungs; but it did not deter him.

On the floor at the foot of the elegant dressing-stand lay Mrs. Van Gordon.

The Broadway spotter stooped and saw a white flame die out around her jeweled hand.

He seized the body and carried it from the room.

Marian bent forward, looked once, and recoiled with a shudder.

It was death!

"The end of the trail," said the New York sleuth, looking up into her face, and then he laid Florette on a sofa, and unclasped her right hand.

He found a bit of paper crushed in the death-clasp.

The young girl waited for the detective to read aloud the writing he had discovered, but she waited in vain.

"It proves all our suspicions, Marian," he said calmly. "Let the story of her crime remain untold."

The next day a number of arrests made in various parts of the city completed Captain Coldgrip's victory, and the Black Hoods, with the exception of Manuel, were in the clutches of the law.

Duke Tolbert, whose exciting experience in New York has been recorded, came back from Pittsburg, and found in the young man who had come from the Far West to receive Marian's hand, a son whom he supposed lost forever.

If the letter left in the steel safe for him by Van Gordon had not been purloined by Florette, he would have found the lost sooner, for the millionaire was anxious that one mystery of the mines should be cleared.

Some time after the tragic ending of his great New York trail, Captain Coldgrip received a letter from beyond the sea, and the few lines it contained told that a certain young man had received a pardon from the Spanish Government, and that Manuel, the young pirate-born adventurer, had started on an honest life. Of course the writer of the letter was Medusa the sorceress, and Manuel's mother!

In due time Marian Van Gordon became the wife of Tolbert's son, and thus the schemes of Manuel and Florette passed beyond the shadow of success.

Sunshine Sam aided the boy Jess until Nina, his mother, was found, when for his work in the famous Black Hoods case he was taken into full partnership with Captain Claude, an honor and a reward fully deserved.

Of course the tragic death of Jean Valjen prevented any one from claiming the twenty thousand francs offered for his recapture; but Marian presented the detective and his pupil with a larger sum than that for their services.

Although Joel Van Gordon ere he died discovered that his wife was a branded convict, and that she kept under lock and key, a paper of white crystals, which afterward finished his career, he never knew the depths of cunning to which she could descend.

Her blow for a million and more cost him his life, but he succeeded at the last moment in making the Broadway sleuth the executor of vengeance, for when Captain Coldgrip was through, the "coolest woman in New York" had passed into history.

The boy, Jess, has since developed into one of the best young spotters in Gotham, and he and Sunshine Sam are inseparable on a trail.

Captain Claude still occupies the little Broadway office, and ere long we may have the pleasure of seeing him again on a great trail which is sure to show the never-failing detective at his best.

THE END.

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